Good Guys Wear Fangs





"Good Guys Wear Fangs"

Reprint

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TYPING: Bill Hupe, Mary Ann McKinnon, and all the wonderful contributors who were kind enough to submit their stories on disk.

PROOF READING: Gail Charistopherson, Ann Hupe, Barb Fish, and Diana Smith. Thank you ever so much, and thanks to everyone who proofread their own stories once they were in final form!

VICTORIAN CLIP ART: I would also like to thank Kirk Taskila for sending in the wonderful public domain clip art which graces those pages for which other art credits are not given.

Editorial

May 18, 1992

Dear Friends and Fans of Good Guy Vampires,

Welcome to the first issue of **GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS.** What this **IS** is adventure, romance, angst, and humor, with an occasional touch of the eerie or mythical thrown in for good measure. What it is **NOT** is horror. (With just one or two possible exceptions!)

There is a good mix of media and original tales. P.N. Elrod, author of **BLOODLIST, LIFEBLOOD, BLOODCIRCLE,** and other **Jack Fleming** novels in THE **VAMPIRE FILES** series (ACE Science Fiction) has given us a **QUANTUM LEAP** crossover in which Sam leaps into Escott, Jack's friend and fellow private eye. (Illustrated by Sherlock)

Janet Reedman, well-known **ROBIN OF SHERWOOD** writer and award-willing poet has given us EXODUS, in which Michael Praed's **SON OF DARKNESS** character Max Schreck awakens from the discarnate state in Rumania. He is helped by Stefan of Castle Vladislaus (introduced in **SUBSPECIES**), and then he in turn rescues Stefan and his lady from Stefan's evil half-brother Radu and the witch Avestitza who reigns over the Iron Woods. (Art by Frances Quinn)

For **STINGRAY** fans, there is an eerily written tale with a classic vampire flavor by **SMALL FAVORS** editor Laurie Keeper, in which Ray must deal with the unreality of finding himself *transformed*... (Art by Peggy Spalding)

CATCHING CAT, by Athan Y. Chilton, is the lyrically beautiful tale of Paul Leluvo, gypsy and musician, who must die in order to find the true nature of love and immortal life with the mysterious woman who loves him. (Art by Athan Y. Chilton)

In **APRIL'S DREAM,** by Jack Summers, a young vampire woman from Marsh Hollow deep in the Appalachians seeks to find some contact with human life other than the death and destruction indiscriminately dealt out by her family. (Art by T.J. Glenn)

And we mustn't forget **NICHOLAS AND VARINA,** created by Diana Smith and Pat Dunn. They are an absolutely delightful vampire couple who go through time doing their best to be philantropic, regardless of what fate has dealt them. The first issue of **GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS** is proud to present four of their adventures:

In the first, **MACGYVER** can't quite figure out what to do with the situation when Varina takes him in hand and insists that she is there to help save him from Murdoc's latest diabolical plan. (Art by Derrin)

In the second, **COLUMBO** can't quite believe what his eyes are telling him as he investigates a gruesome murder committed by a self-styled "vampire-killer" who is stalking Nicholas. (Art by Cheryl Duval)

The third is an original story set in ages past in which **NICHOLAS AND VARINA** find an interestingly non-violent means for dealing with a self-righteous "vampire killer" of that age. (Art by Barb Johnson)

And finally, in the fourth, Barnabas Collins of the new **DARK SHADOWS** has a real reason to believe that there is hope when an ancient witch as powerful as Angelique takes her on head to head! (Guest starring **LIARA THE IRISH WITCH,** created by Valerie Meachum). (Art by Valerie Meachum)

INCUNABULA, by professional writer Margaret Carter, is the tale of a graduate student who meets again an old friend who wants her to help him steal a very rare book from the antiquities room of the university library. What secret is he hiding, and why has he always kept her at arm's length? This one grabs you and just won't let go! (Art by Barb Johnson)

And there's absolutely beautiful, not-to be missed poetry by **Janet P. Reedman, Heidi Staneslow,** and professional writer **Judith Conley.**

Getting back to original tales, Lyle MacDougall has written **MOONDANCE,** a dream-like tale of a remote village of vampires and a hiker who stumbles across them (art by T.J. Glenn), and Rachel Kadushin has written **MOONSHINE,** about a woman who awakens to find herself imprisoned and surrounded by a group of children who

are *different*...

A CURSE IN TIME is the tale of inept Vampire Hunter Martin Planting, and how the vampire always gets the girl. A **SON OF DARKNESS/ROBIN OF SHERWOOD** crossover (with a touch of humor) by Sharon Wells. (Art by Sharon Wells)

If you're a fan of **STARSKY & HUTCH**, don't miss INSTINCT and CHOICES by B.N. Fish. In the first, Starsky and Hutch can't figure out just exactly what is so strange about Detective **NICK KNIGHT**... In the second, Hutch is viciously attacked by a rogue vampire, and Nick and Starsky must help him make the most difficult decision of his life!

And there's more for **NICK KNIGHT** fans. Cheryl L. Connors and M.H. Burchett have each written tales that put him on the job in Los Angeles, and Lisa Savignano has written a terrifying account of **NICK'S** -- and La Croix's -- blood-soaked origins as vampires in the deep impenetrable jungles of South America.

So don't just sit there! Pick your favorite story and start reading, or start at the beginning and just work your way through!

By this time, most of you have probably seen **FOREVER KNIGHT**, the CBS late-night reincarnation of Rick Springfield's made-for-TV movie, **NICK KNIGHT**. This one stars Geraint Wyn Davies, and is a *very* different interpretation. I encourage everyone to see it at least once, and see what you think. If you like it, write to CBS television and tell them so; once a cancellation has been announced, it will be too late.

Stories for **GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS 2** based upon either the original **NICK KNIGHT** or the new **FOREVER KNIGHT** will be welcome. As far as this editor is concerned, they are totally unrelated universes, and any authors writing about the original TV-movie should feel free to disregard any new information about **NICK** that is introduced in **FOREVER KNIGHT**. Also, for those of you who would like to sound off about which series you prefer and why, this will be one of the main topics of discussion for the second issue of the companion publication to **GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS**, **THE GOOD GUY VAMPIRE LETTERZINE**. (See the advertising section in the back of this issue for more information.)

As you have probably guessed by now, both original and media stories are welcome. You may write about your favorite hero becomming or meeting a "good guy" vampire, or write about an already established "good guy" vampire; particular favorites of this editor among already established "good guy" vampire universes are **TO DIE FOR II: SON OF DARKNESS** (available on video), the new **DARK SHADOWS**, **BLOOD TIES** (Fox TV-movie) , **NICK KNIGHT** (made-for-TV movie), **FOREVER KNIGHT** (currently on CBS Late Night), and **SUBSPECIES** (available on video). I would encourage anyone who spots a really appealing "good guy" vampire on video or television to let this editor know--it's always possible to pass the word along to someone who might be willing to write a story for the next issue!

DO WRITE IN WITH YOUR LETTERS OF COMMENT! Let me know what you liked, what you didn't like, and what can be improved about **GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS**. Letters of comment will be published in the second issue. Also, please list your favorite five stories in order of preference, and your three favorite artists, also in order of preference. This will give me an idea of what the readership likes, and will help me in making choices for **GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS 2**.

How would everyone feel about separating **GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS** into two editions, one for original stories and one for media stories? Would this be preferable, or would you prefer to continue the current mix? **PLEASE VOTE ON THIS ISSUE!** I would like to take everyone's opinions into consideration.

Until next time,

MaryAnn

Mary Ann B. McKinnon, Editor

WHAT MAKES A VAMPIRE "GOOD"?

by

Margaret L. Carter

A "good" vampire is essentially one who behaves morally in terms of his/her behavior toward us, ordinary mortals making the judgment. In practical terms, fiction seems to define a good vampire as one who obtains blood without killing or "raping" human victims (the problem of how to get blood has to be dealt with by every author creating a "good" vampire) and conforms in some sense to human morality or at least acknowledges human beings' right to ethical consideration from him/her. (And at this point I'll abandon linguistically awkward attempts at non-sexism and fall back on the established English convention that "he" in the abstract includes everybody.) This distinction presupposes that vampires have free will, that they retain their individuality and can choose their actions. Therefore, stories postulating that the transformation into a vampire automatically changes the character into a demonic creature--as in numerous bad movies and, I must sadly concede, in Stoker's *Dracula*--are dismissed from consideration at the start.

In a recent essay in the vampire fanzine *Onyx* (No. 3), Jacqueline Lichtenberg discusses this point in terms of the difference between the horror approach and the science fiction approach. In the horror mind-set, she says, "the unknown is a menace because it's a menace," an attitude that leaves no room for moral choice or growth. In science fiction, the unknown is a menace because we don't understand it yet. With that attitude (as in Lichtenberg's own fiction), a vampire can be as much a person as the rest of us, but with a different set of problems and moral quandaries. Needless to say, this second approach appeals more to me than the first. When I originally read *Dracula*, I loved the book, but my impulse was to identify with the vampires and wonder how *they* saw these events, how they experienced the world. My first lengthy piece of writing (age 13) was a story from the viewpoint of a man who finds himself changing into a vampire.

"Good vampire" stories fall into two basic categories: (a) Vampirism as such is intrinsically evil or involves an inexorable pull toward evil, and the good vampire is one who fights this pull. (b) Vampirism is simply a change of condition, morally neutral, and a vampire's behavior can be good or evil on the same terms as anybody else's (aside from the complications of the blood-drinking problem). Now to cite some examples of each kind:

Stories in which a moral vampire is fighting against a fundamentally evil state of being often end in the vampire's death, as in the movie *Blacula*, in which the tragic vampire commits suicide by walking into the sunlight (a device that has been imitated since then to the point of becoming a cliche). *The Silver Kiss* by Annette Curtis Klause (Delacorte, 1990), an excellent YA novel, uses the suicide-in-sunlight motif with a delicate touch. The teen-age vampire, Simon, fights against vampiric evil in the person of his brother, who "died" while a child and therefore exists as a diabolical young-old little boy who uses his helpless appearance to seduce adult victims. Simon does not have to attack people for nourishment because he can subsist on animals--the simplest solution to the blood problem, used by many authors. Clint, the hero of *Blood County* by Curt Selby (DAW, 1981), was fathered by the vampire who rules the town, sparing the populace

in return for blood and loyalty. Clint returns home after an absence of many years, his vampire nature gradually asserting itself, to find himself battling his father and his evil half-brother. That good brother-bad brother motif is very popular in vampire fiction! (It's also used in a well-written YA trilogy, "The Vampire Diaries" by L. J. Smith, Harper, 1991.) After he and his allies win, Clint has to become the town's vampire lord whether he wants to or not. Many authors, it seems, objectify the good-evil conflict by giving the nice guy a nasty vampire to fight. *Vampire of the Mists* by Christie Golden (TSR, 1991), based on the Advanced Dungeons and Dragons Ravenloft game setting, features a vampire elf named Jander. Because elves love sunlight and the beauties of nature, this condition is especially terrible for Jander. He fights the drift toward evil, hard to do because in this fictional world vampires have to drink human blood. Investigating the past of a mysterious mad girl whom he had loved until her death, he gets drawn into the world of Ravenloft, where he meets Strahd, the evil vampire who rules the land. They sustain an uneasy alliance for some time, but in the end Jander has to sacrifice himself in open conflict with Strahd. Possibly the most gruesome picture of vampirism ever created appears in Richard Lee Byers' *The Vampire's Apprentice* (Zebra, 1992). The protagonist, David, accepts the change eagerly because the evil vampire has deceived him into imagining vampirism as a glorious condition of expanded powers and pleasures, above dreary human life. Instead, the book begins with David digging his way out of a coffin, abandoned by his "master." He soon learns that a vampire's true condition is that of a rotting but ambulatory corpse; the evil vampire's allure is nothing but illusion. The villain enjoys manipulating people, preying on them, playing tricks and destroying their lives. He delights in tormenting David by harassing the latter's friends. David solves the blood problem by drinking from comatose, terminally ill hospital patients, to whom he can give a merciful release. But the villain won't leave him alone. His decision to attempt the villain's destruction also involves finding the courage to seek his own death, because in this novel vampirism is purely horrible.

Fevre Dream by George R. R. Martin (Simon and Schuster, 1982) is a bit different because his vampires are a separate species, not supernaturally transformed human beings. Therefore they cannot be called "evil" as a group. Normally, however, their existence involves unremitting violence toward human beings, since once a month an irresistible bloodlust comes over them, compelling them to quench it by killing at least one person. Animals don't satisfy the need. The vampire hero, Joshua, partly because during his formative years he thought he was human and therefore suffered terrible guilt when he grew into his bloodlust, sets as his life's goal freedom from the "red thirst." He invents a potion that satisfies the need, so he and his followers no longer have to kill. They come into conflict with a vampire who thinks human beings should be treated solely as food and therefore tries to destroy Joshua. Joshua forms an alliance and eventually achieves true friendship with a Mississippi steamboat captain. Wonderful blend of historical fiction and SF horror--if you ever come across a copy of this, snap it up!

The obvious leader in the other category--vampirism as a morally neutral condition--is, of course, Chelsea Quinn Yarbro's series. (I'm not discussing Anne Rice because I'm not sure I would consider her vampires "good guys"--they all seem irresistibly compelled to kill [which I consider a rather silly convention in the absence of a biological imperative such as postulated in Martin's novel], most of the time anyway, and a character's growth as a vampire seems to involve developing ever further into a condition in which he doesn't much mind killing. Admittedly, though, some people might consider Lestat a good guy, and Maharet, the "vampire fairy godmother" of *Queen of the Damned* --delightful notion!--does actually seem fond of her human family. So I'd call Rice's vampires basically amoral but fascinating anyway.) Saint-Germain, Madelaine, Olivia, and James Tree are nice people--in Saint-Germain's case, a dazzlingly seductive person--who happen to have undergone an irreversible change involving certain limitations, powers, and needs. Yarbro's vampires can drink from animals, but we don't see them doing it very often. They avoid being soulless predators by gifting their human blood donors

with beautiful dreams and sexual ecstasy. As Saint-Germain insists on many occasions, without the passion, the blood is nothing. He represents the female fantasy of the ideally considerate lover, whose pleasure depends on his partner's satisfaction. For contrast, a couple of times he encounters vampires who don't understand this principle and try to satisfy their needs by ruthless predation.

Fred Saberhagen's Dracula, in *The Dracula Tape* (Warner, 1975) and its sequels, follows a similar pattern. Saberhagen's vampires live mostly on animal blood; human donors supply sexual pleasure. A few "vampire rapists" appear in the series, to point up the proper behavior by contrast. *The Dracula Tape* gives the Count's first-person narrative of what *really* happened on that famous visit to England. Van Helsing is a hardheaded anti-vampire fanatic who bullies the rest of the group into persecuting the Count, who only wants to be left in peace. He drinks from Lucy because she practically asks for it (*he* isn't the one who condemned her to death by staking afterward!), and he falls deeply in love with Mina. In Saberhagen's version, of course, Dracula survives his supposed "death" and returns for a number of sequels. Great series!

Lee Killough's *Blood Hunt* and *Bloodlinks* (TOR, 1987, 1988) and P. N. Elrod's *Bloodlist* (Ace, 1990) and its sequels show a number of similarities. Both heroes are newly-resurrected vampires in search of their murderers. Killough's Garreth is a policeman, and Elrod's Jack is a reporter turned detective. Both live on animal blood, and each author gives us several absorbing "day in the life of a vampire" sequences showing how the hero deals with the mechanics of his new lifestyle. A major difference is that Garreth is more or less accidentally transformed by an "evil" (or at least totally amoral and self-centered) female vampire, while Jack chooses to have his vampire lover (whom we never meet, since she disappeared before the beginning of the first novel) attempt to change him. Another difference--while Garreth needs human blood as well as animal blood (and fights the need until another vampire shows him that blood can be freely given and need not be taken from unwilling victims), he engages in normal sex and seems to get no erotic thrill from human donors. For Jack, on the other hand, drinking from his new girlfriend, Bobbi, is his only means of sexual satisfaction. In this way Jack is a lot like Saberhagen's Dracula. Another "vampire detective" series comes from Tanya Huff--*Blood Price* and *Blood Trail* (DAW, 1991, 1992), with two more forthcoming. Huff's vampire, Henry, is the illegitimate son of Henry VIII (like Saint-Germain, a real historical figure). He requires human blood and, like many "nice" vampires, "pays" for it by giving sexual pleasure. One entertaining touch--Henry supports himself by writing historical romances under a pen name.

Elaine Bergstrom's nonhuman, non-supernatural vampires in *Shattered Glass* (Berkley, 1989) and its companion novels live on animal as well as human blood. This vampire clan, the Austras, are geniuses in stained glass, responsible for the glories of many of the great cathedrals. Thus they bestow precious gifts on the human race. On the personal level, they give their donors erotic pleasure; also, in the sharing of blood, they can merge with the donor's thoughts and give him or her visions so lifelike they seem like real experiences. Another vampire-as-alien species appears in Jacqueline Lichtenberg's *Those of My Blood* (St. Martin's, 1988). These vampires, descendants of aliens stranded on Earth, fall into two groups, the Residents, who feel a kinship with the human race and drink cloned blood rather than prey on human beings, and the Tourists, who have no compunctions about drinking human blood and otherwise manipulating people. The Tourists want to establish contact with their interplanetary brethren, while Titus, the vampire hero, tries to stop them for fear of disaster to the human race. Yet the antagonists in this novel can't be called truly evil, for they are not malicious and are simply doing what they think best for the survival of their people.

The quintessential vampire-as-alien, Dr. Weyland in *The Vampire Tapestry* by Suzy McKee Charnas (Simon and Schuster, 1980; paperbacks by Pocket Books and TOR), is a special case. He can hardly be described as nice. Originally he acknowledges no ethical obligation to his human "cattle." Yet, as the novel carries us step by step from an external view of Weyland as pure predator to the point where we enter into his thoughts, we come to understand and even sympathize with him. He rejects any notion of kinship to humanity, for he fears such

weakness would endanger (as he puts it) "the ruthlessness that keeps me alive." He insists that his resemblance to us is nothing but protective mimicry. Yet he finds himself moved by human art (opera and ballet). Is he growing soft, becoming too much like the inferior creatures he is compelled to imitate? Weyland, compared to most human villains, is relatively harmless. Though he can't ingest animal blood, his necessary predation on human victims leaves them with no more than temporary weakness. He kills only when driven in self-defense (aside from one stressful incident when he momentarily loses control). Weyland resembles a magnificent animal with better-than-human intelligence but, as Charnas remarks in an interview, "the inner emotional life of the average housecat." The novel shows us Weyland's unwilling emotional growth. Eventually he finds himself actually caring for some of his human associates. This development so frightens him that he chooses to retreat into the "long sleep," suspended animation from which he will wake decades later, "refreshed and restored," all those disturbing memories blotted out. (When he reappears in "Advocates," a collaboration between Charnas and Yarbro in *Under the Fang*, Pocket Books, 1991, he seems to have slept off those inconvenient human emotions.) A fascinating film counterpart of Weyland (with touches of Joshua from *Fevre Dream*) is the nameless vampire in *Dance of the Damned*.

The "good vampire" trend in recent fiction mirrors our cultural ideal of tolerance for alternative lifestyles and formerly persecuted minority groups. The most positive of these novels, like fiction about other kinds of aliens, suggest an attitude similar to the IDIC principle in Star Trek--a celebration of our differences and the symbiotic exchange they make possible. The most attractive modern vampires do not bring death; like Saint-Germain, they "share life."

- The End -



PARTNERS IN TIME

by

P.N. Elrod

Sam found himself standing in a quiet, gloomy kitchen sporting the kind of appliances he'd seen in tv reruns. He half expected June Cleaver to come bustling in with her pearls and lipstick to check on something in the old oven. Except this oven wasn't old, not now, not in this now. What year was it, anyway?

His hand was on a doorknob. Okay, going out or coming in? He decided "in." The body he now occupied was chilled and. . .hungry. Clothes? A man's. Good. He sighed with relief at that happy favor, but the sigh triggered a hacking cough. Great. He had a cold. He shut the door decisively and experimented with a light switch just visible on the wall. It worked and the gloom vanished. He felt the gentle pressure of a hat on his head and removed it, tossing it on an old oak table before him that took up most of the floor.

The place was spotless, but plain. No fluffy curtains, no plaster or plastic ornaments for decoration, not even a house plant. An old telephone hung on one wall, the kind with a separate ear piece and receiver. Next to it was a shelf holding some phone books, a pad of note paper, and some pencils. Above the shelf was a calendar turned to November. It was 1956. Wow. Okay, that covered the when, now about the where. . .the top phone book was for the greater Chicago area.

Well, he'd be a couple of points up on Al when he arrived, which could be at any minute. He listened. Silence. At least he was alone. It was always an exercise in embarrassment and ingenuity trying to talk to Al with others present.

Who was he? Sam fumbled off his gloves, coughing again. His nose wasn't running. He'd probably leaped into a chronic smoker. Yup. His clothes smelled of tobacco, not unpleasantly so; the man probably favored a pipe. The guy would just have to do without for the duration. Sam just hoped that his host would return the courtesy back in the—

There was an unaccustomed, but familiar weight dragging on his left side. Gloves off, Sam opened his overcoat, then his suit coat. He was wearing a shoulder holster; the heavy weight was the gun in the holster. He gingerly pulled it out. Good grief, what a monster. It was some kind of old revolver, but like nothing he'd ever seen before; any bigger and it would need wheels and a horse to pull it. The maker's mark declared it to be a Webley, whatever that was. English, maybe? Damn his Swiss cheese memory.

Sam carefully put the gun back into place. He knew that it wouldn't just go off all by itself, but better to wait for Al to come and hopefully tell him how to safely work this particular model. That posed another good question: why was this man carrying a concealed weapon?

He slapped pockets until he found a wallet. The Illinois driver's license said that he was Charles William Escott, age 56. No picture, but from the height and weight he was tall and on the thin side. Sam sorted through the other items: an old photo of a beautiful woman, some business cards, a few



of which read "The Escott Agency" and gave an address and a phone number. The next card to come up was an investigator's license.

"Oh, boy. I'm a private eye."

"I thought that was 'private agent,' Charles," said a voice behind him.

Sam nearly climbed into the phone.

Contrite, the voice—not Al's—said, "Jeez, I'm sorry. I thought you were used to that by now."

"Used to what? Coronary failure?" Sam's hard thumping heart was firmly in his throat and reluctant to return to its proper place. He had absolutely, positively NOT heard anyone come in.

"Hard day, huh? Lemme get you something."

The other man walked past Sam to another room. He was tall, lean, in his early twenties, and wearing a bathrobe, pajamas, and slippers. His dark hair was rumpled as though he'd just gotten out of bed, but he didn't seem sleepy.

"Gin and tonic as usual?" he asked cheerfully.

Sam felt his empty stomach twist. "No, thanks. Really. I'll just have some water."

The man shrugged and shut the liquor cabinet, then peered at Sam. "You feel all right?"

"Just a little hungry." Sam retreated to the refrigerator and opened it. The contents were disappointing, half a loaf of bread, some butter, jelly, a pint bottle of milk, mostly gone. It looked like his dorm days at MIT all over again, but without the soft drinks or leftover pizza crusts littering the bottom. His stomach growled. "Sure could go for some pizza," he muttered.

"Some what?"

Sam hadn't thought that the guy could have heard him. "Ah. . .nothing."

"Charles, sit down, I'll get you something. You look kind of tired."

He _felt_ tired. Besides, he didn't know where anything was and the other guy did. Sam sat at one of the kitchen chairs and watched, consequently learning the location of the pantry and cooking utensils. The man brought out a can of Spam and another of chicken noodle soup. He opened both, slicing one for sandwiches and heating the other in a saucepan. The stuff was no doubt packed with sodium.

"Where's the bread knife?"

Sam hesitated. "Ah, the usual place?"

"Yeah, but where's that?" He poked and scrabbled in one of the drawers. "Never mind. Found it."

So who was this guy? He seemed friendly enough, but what was his relation to Charles William Escott, P.I.? Were they relatives, friends, landlord and boarder?

The man pulled out the bread and began slicing it. Sliced bread... something Sam had always taken for granted. The differences between his time and this one were enormous, comparable to visiting another planet, almost. Damn it, where was Al? He could put his foot right into things without knowing it unless he got more information about this leap.

"So—uh—how did your day go?" Sam asked casually.

His companion only shook his head and gave a crooked smile. "Eat your sandwich." He put a loaded plate on the table. The soup was hot now; he produced a big bowl and poured all of it in, setting it before Sam along with a spoon. "No tip necessary."

Sam smiled back and thanked him. "Aren't you going to have any?"

"What a kidder. I'm going upstairs." So saying, he walked out. The old wooden floor creaked and popped in time to his footsteps. Granted he was wearing slippers, but how could he have come in so silently before?

Sam shrugged and finished his meal. His borrowed body's needs sated, he politely put the dishes in the sink to wash later and wandered into the next room to explore.

It was a dining area, only the table there was covered with books. Forensics, theater, geology, antiques, local history, local politics,

folklore; either Escott or his companion had a wide range of studies. The next room was a comfortable looking parlor with overstuffed furniture, a table covered with a neatly stacked pile of newspapers, and a big, old-fashioned radio. Sam turned it on, slightly puzzled when no sound came out. Oh, yeah, these models were full of tubes that needed time to warm up. He could just hear it humming to life. He shut it off as some commercial began to swell in volume.

An arched opening led to the hall and the front entrance; stairs went up to the second floor. Another door went to the storage under the stairs, and yet another to the basement. He'd come in a circle and was back in the kitchen. So much for the nickel tour.

Still in his/Escott's overcoat, Sam removed it to hang up in the storage closet where it shared space with other coats. The suit beneath was well cut and fitted, the cloth of good quality. The padding had been adjusted to accommodate the extra bulk of the gun, minimizing its presence. He wondered what he looked like. What kind of face went with such natty clothes and such a deadly weapon? There were no mirrors handy. Maybe up in his room. Wherever that was.

On the second floor landing Sam had several options offered to him. From behind one closed door came the sound of water being energetically splashed around as the other guy bathed. Sam picked the next room over and eased in for a look. It was pleasantly messy: books, magazines, clothes; on the bed was a bundle wrapped in brown paper. A tag on a string advertised the laundry it came from and stated that it belonged to a J. Fleming.

Sam glanced unconsciously toward the bathroom wall. Hello, J. Fleming, whoever you are, he thought. He had a name for his helpful friend, now how about a face for himself? No mirror in this room. Sam left and explored farther down the hall.

Another flight of stairs led to yet another floor. The house had been modernized, but it felt old. Not a bad feeling, just different. Sam decided to save the upper areas for later and checked out another bedroom.

Bingo. The place was painfully neat. You could bounce a quarter on the bedspread. No dust lurked on any surface. What was this? A road show of The Odd Couple and he had the part of Felix?

No mirror over the bureau. Sam opened the wardrobe door: suits, shirts, shoes, all lined up like a regiment on parade. That was hardly surprising. Fastened to the inside of the door was a full length mirror. Getting that first look at his borrowed body was always a mixed blessing. His curiosity was fulfilled, but sometimes it could be a blow to his own self-image. Good grief, how long since he'd last been in his own body?

Too long, he answered morosely.

The man peering back was in good shape for his age, tall and thin as promised on the driver's license. A long, bony face, hair receding only slightly, gray eyes, a big beak of a nose—he might have been good looking except for that. Sam turned sideways, peering with one eye to take it all in. Well, it wasn't too bad. Distinguished. He'd think of it as distinguished.

A knuckle tapped lightly against his open door. Fleming stood there in his bathrobe with a towel around his neck and a bundle in his arms. The brown paper had been torn open, revealing half a dozen white shirts.

"They got our stuff mixed up again. My name was on your laundry." He offered the bundle to Sam. "I figure you've got mine."

Sam accepted the bundle and looked around the Spartan room for a similar object, spotting it on the chair next to the bureau. He traded one for the other, handing the latter to Fleming.

That mirror. Something odd there. . .

Sam saw Escott's reflection clearly enough, but by some trick of the angle, Fleming wasn't in the frame. He stared, tried not to, and stared again. What the hell. . . ?

He dropped the bundle. Sam couldn't tear his eyes from the mirror. All

he could see was Escott gaping back. Not one sign of the other man.

"Oops," said Fleming, starting forward. "I'll get it." In the mirror, the stuff jumped all by itself as he took hold, and then, as he scooped it up, vanished.

Utterly.

And Fleming still wasn't in the mirror.

Sam's mind knew it had to be impossible, but his eyes were telling him something quietly and horribly different. He felt all the blood go out of his face. His heart began laboring heavily in his throat, and he couldn't seem to find any air to pull into his lungs.

Fleming looked sharply at him. "Charles? What's the matter?"

He could see the mirror and what wasn't in it. From where he was positioned he had to. Sam looked from its selective surface to the solid young man standing right next to him and back again. Al didn't reflect in mirrors either, but he was a hologram. This was. . .was. . .

Sam's world lurched. He felt sick.

Fleming, his face creased by concern, reached out for him. Sam tried to back away and only stumbled. Fleming caught his arm in a strong grip, steadied him, and guided him over to the bed.

"Sit down a minute, buddy. You look terrible. What's the matter?" He shifted his hand to feel Sam's forehead. "Jeez, you're clammy as mackerel. You feel feverish?"

Sam's mouth flapped. "Yeah. Fever. I guess."

"Your heart's going like a drum," he commented, shoving the laundry to one side. He reached for Sam's throat. Sam flinched away. "Take it easy, Charles, I was just loosening your collar."

"Water," Sam croaked, not wanting this stranger to touch him.

Fleming nodded, his eyes wide and worried. "Right away." He hurried out, paused at the bathroom, then clattered downstairs.

Sam rose and looked at the mirror more closely. It seemed a normal, ordinary mirror. What it reflected—or failed to reflect—was something else again. He turned and checked the rest of the room. The laundry Fleming had abandoned was back, sitting on the floor where he'd left it. The mirror agreed with that image. Now.

Oh, God. What had he leaped into this time?

Fleming appeared in the doorway again, carefully holding a glass and a squat bottle of brandy. Sam hadn't heard his return upstairs.

"Thought this might work better than just water," Fleming said, coming in. He poured a healthy shot into the glass and offered it.

Sam drank it straight down, hardly tasting it.

"What happened? You see a ghost or something?"

Sam choked on the last few drops he'd swallowed and started coughing. Fleming took him back to the bed and made him sit.

"Want me to call Clarson?" he asked.

"Clarson?"

"I think you need a doctor, Charles."

I need a different leap, thought Sam wildly. "No, I'm fine. Just dizzy for a second. I'm better now."

Fleming wasn't convinced. "What's wrong, then? Some kind of a fit?"

"I guess so, yeah, an anxiety attack." Sam offered him what must have been a ghastly smile and hoped with all his heart that he'd go away.

"What the hell is that?"

Sam back-pedaled. "Oh, nothing, I just. . .I mean. . .could you pour me another drink?" He held the glass up between them.

Fleming complied, making it a double. "I mean it, Charles, have you got anything serious that you need to take care of?"

"No. . .I don't think so. I'm. . .ah. . .just not feeling quite myself at the moment."

"That's for damn-sure. You don't sound like yourself either."

A rectangle of blinding blue-white light abruptly appeared in the middle of Escott's bureau. Al stepped out of it, wearing a red and silver shirt, purple pants with silver stripes up the sides and red shoes with multi-colored lights blinking along the outer edges of the soles and heels.

Normalcy at last.

"I don't sound like myself?" Sam echoed, hoping Al would guess that he was out of his depth.

Al glanced up from his link to Ziggy. "This guy is English, Sam. Try talking like Basil Rathbone."

Basil who? Sam thought, that thought clearly on his face.

Al correctly assumed that Sam's memory had failed him again. "Forget it. Can you do an English accent? Kind of formal? Use ten words where five would do?"

"Yeah," answered Fleming, unaware of the third party in the room. "You practicing your American accent again?"

Sam coughed and nodded, not trusting himself to answer either of them coherently.

"Get rid of him, Sam, we have to talk," said Al.

Oh, boy, do we have to talk. "Uh. . ."

"His name is Jack," Al interjected helpfully. "That's what you call him."

"Uh, Jack. . .I was wondering if you could possibly brew me up a strong cup of tea. . .or something?" The last bit didn't sound quite Kosher, but it seemed to work.

"Sure. Are you going to be all right?"

"Yeah—yes. I'm feeling much better. Nothing to worry about. I'll just stay here and rest." Sam showed his teeth a little and tried not to look at the mirror again.

Reluctantly, Fleming left, but popped his head back in. "Jasmine or Earl Grey?"

"Earl Grey," Sam said promptly, absurdly glad that he and Escott shared similar tastes in tea. Fleming went away. Sam nipped across the room and closed the door. His hands were shaking.

"Must have been a rough leap," Al observed. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"That's what he just said," Sam hissed. "Did you see him?"

"Of course I saw him. He was standing right there."

"I mean in the mirror."

"What mirror?"

Sam groaned. Al had had his back to it the whole time. "Why am I here, Al, and how do I get out?"

"First things first: it's 1956, your name is—"

"Charles William Escott, yeah, I know all that—"

"Except he usually goes by the name of Charles W. Escott, and he's a private detective here in Chicago."

"Al, tell me about this other guy. Tell me everything."

"His name's Jack Fleming and he's been working for you since 1936..." Al thumped his link. "Nah, that can't be right. That guy's still in his twenties. Ziggy must have screwed up on the dates. Anyway, Fleming is sort of a silent partner who helps you out on your cases. You both work together, but he usually keeps to the background. In fact, we hardly have any information on him except for his tax records. No traffic tickets, no voter's registration, photos, bank accounts, marriage license—this is your original invisible man."

Sam blanched and fought down a brief, but very intense urge to giggle.

"Now the guy you leaped into is something else again. He's pretty successful at what he does, but there's something I gotta warn you about."

"What?"

"Well, it was when you leaped into him and he leaped into you. . ." Al

waved his arms first one way then another to illustrate.

"C'mon, Al."

"Doctor Beeks thinks the experience may have rattled his cage more than most. He calmed down fast enough, and started asking the usual questions they all ask, and then we asked him our questions, you know how it is."

Sam glared at him to hurry.

"Anyway, after the surprise wore off and he figured out that we were trying to help him, he started to cooperate just fine. Only there's this one little thing that might be a problem. You wouldn't know it to look at him--you. . .either of you. He's loony, Sam."

Sam said nothing.

"I don't know how this will effect your leap, but it's something you need to be aware of. It was kind of scary, too. I tell you he was talking just as calm as could be, charming the socks off Dr. Beeks with that accent of his and then with a perfectly straight face he told us his partner was a--"

"Vampire," said Sam.

Al went blank for a second. "How'd you know? This brain wave thing's only supposed to go as far as the Imaging Chamber."

"I know. I'm saying that Escott's right."

Al pursed his lips and peered at Sam with friendly concern.

"Don't look at me like that, Al. I know what you're thinking. You think I'm nuts too, but I'm not."

"Of course. I know you're not, but this Escott is. Maybe some of the crazy quilt blocking up his brain got left behind in the leap and it's confusing you. That's happened before."

"Don't remind me. Forget all about that. As soon as this Fleming comes back I'll be able to prove it to you. You just watch that mirror and tell me what you see in it--I mean, what you don't see."

"Maybe I should go back and tell Beeks that--"

"Don't you dare run off and leave me alone with this!"

Al raised his hands and made soothing gestures. "Okay, okay. You know, the funny part is that Escott told us almost exactly the same thing back in the waiting room about looking in mirrors."

"He knows all about--about Fleming, then?"

"That's the impression I got, but Sam, the guy is a complete fruitcake. He must have stayed out in the noonday sun too long and fried his brain."

Sam dropped his voice. "Fleming's coming."

Al shrugged. "So? He can't hear me."

"Just watch that mirror."

Fleming opened the door cautiously. "You talking to yourself?"

Sam's lips tightened. If this guy was. . .was what Sam thought he was, then he might have extra good hearing. "Yes. I suppose so. Terribly bad habit to fall into, don't you think?"

"That is the worst Basil Rathbone imitation I've ever heard," Al stated, his eyes rolling toward the ceiling.

Sam ignored him and invited Fleming in.

"Hope I got it right," the young man said, his hands full of a tray cluttered with a teapot and accessories. "It's been a hell of a long time since I've cooked anything."

"You did quite well with the soup."

"That's just heating something. I didn't know how much tea to put in."

"I'm sure it'll be fine." Sam looked past him toward Al, who was transfixed in front of the mirror. He had to bite his tongue hard to keep from saying "I told you so" out loud.

Al whipped back and forth between the empty mirror and the reality walking across the room with the tray. "Uh-uh, Sam. No, this is some kinda trick. Oom-possible. Uh-uh. Nope. Nein. Negatory. Ix-nay. Nyet." He dashed over and stared, placing himself almost nose to nose with Fleming. "Can you touch him? I mean, he is solid?" Al was sounding desperate.

"Sugar?" asked Fleming, innocently unaware of things.

"Yes. . .please," replied Sam, answering both their questions. Al looked like he was rapidly approaching the straw-grasping stage.

"Maybe he's some kind of a hologram that's solid," he suggested brightly. He reached out. Not surprisingly, his hand went right through Fleming's body. Al made a sick, humming sound in his upper throat.

Fleming shivered suddenly.

"Something wrong?" asked Sam, alarmed that the man was showing a reaction.

"Nothing. Thought I felt something. . .like someone just walked over my grave." He hunched his shoulders. "Maybe a boat's sailing over that part of the lake," he added, sounding uneasy.

Al jerked his hand away and backed up, nearly blundering through a wall. "I gotta look into this, Sam. Hold the fort. Stay calm. Don't panic. I'll be right back." He frantically punched in the exit code and ducked through the doorway before it was fully open. "Above all, don't panic!" he bellowed over his shoulder, just as it whooshed shut.

Who's panicking? thought Sam. Maybe I should. I'm stuck in 1956 in some creaky old house with a vampire. . .who's serving me tea.

"You see something?" asked Fleming.

Sam's stomach writhed. "Like what?"

"Thought I saw. . ."

"Saw what?"

Fleming raised a hand, waggling the fingers near his temple. "Like a heat shimmer, corner of the eye."

Sam solemnly shook his head. Much to his relief, the other man shrugged it off and asked if he were feeling better. "Oh, yes, real cheerio and all that. Nothing like a nice hot cuppa." Sam instinctively knew he was overdoing his act, but was too nervous to stop himself.

Fleming's eyes traveled to the brandy bottle on the night stand. "Okay. Well, you get some rest, I'm going to put some clothes on. Call if you need anything."

How about a hammer, stake, cross, and garlic? Sam smiled thinly and nodded a lot until Fleming was out of the room. Maybe he should lock the door. No, that wouldn't work, he'd been invited in, but then this was his home, apparently, and had been for some time. And Escott his. . .employer?

Or something else. Sam launched himself from the bed, nearly upsetting the tea tray. He flicked on the bureau lamp and aimed the shade so the light would fall on himself; at the same time he tore at his collar.

It was one of the kind that attached separately to the shirt by means of some tiny buttons. One of them popped off and spun away. Sam ignored it and got his neck free of its starched prison. He twisted this way and that, frantically checking every inch of his throat for telltale fang marks.

Nothing.

Blood pounded against the top of his skull. Easy now, Sam, you don't want to give Escott a heart attack. He took a few deep breaths, then got out of his coat and opened up his shirt. He checked his bare arms at the pulse points. Clean, though one wrist bore a faint white scar. A cut of some kind, but an old one. There was another scar low down on his left side, much larger, but also old. Other than that he was clean. Okay, so he wasn't this guy's live-in lunch, which was a tremendous relief, but what did that prove?

Then Sam looked himself--or rather Escott--in the eye and suddenly felt very foolish. What was he scared of? Fleming had been behaving like a perfectly normal person full of honest solicitude for a sick friend. If anyone had been acting strangely it was himself/Escott. Somewhat red in the face, Sam buttoned his shirt and tucked in the tails. The shoulder holster impeded things a bit. Damn, he hadn't been able to ask Al about the gun. He hadn't been able to ask a lot of things. Al was sure taking his time. It wasn't that long a walk from the Imaging Chamber to the waiting room and back.

He assumed that's where Al would head, bursting with questions for Escott.

He had a few thousand of his own to ask.

"Hey, Charles?" Fleming poked his head in the door.

"Yes?"

"I'm looking for a manila file folder, about this big, and labeled 'notes.' Have you seen it?"

"No, I haven't," Sam answered truthfully.

"Damn. What about the office? You remember seeing it there?"

"No. Sorry. Is it important?"

"Sort of, it's got an outline for a story I'm working on. Now that I think about it I'm sure I left it there. Guess I'll run over and make sure." Gone for a second, he bobbed back again. "That is, if you're okay."

Sam assured him that he was and Fleming went off. The front door opened and shut. After a minute, Sam heard a car start up and drive away.

His stomach was fluttering. "I don't like this one at all," he said, directing his opinion toward Anybody Who Might Be Listening.

No One answered.

"Al, where the hell are you?" he demanded. No answer to that one, either. Was this the leap? Just sit here in the house and fidget and fume because Al couldn't pull himself together long enough to tell him—

Whoosh.

"Sam!" Al hesitated just beyond the opening. "You alone?"

"Yeah, c'mon through."

Al did so and the door vanished. He was. . .green. It clashed badly with the red and silver shirt. "You okay?"

"Everybody keeps asking me if I'm okay. Yes! For the official record, Sam Beckett is perfectly healthy! Now tell me what's going on so I can get out of here."

"Take it easy, Sam. I'm sorry I shot out so fast, but I had to—"

"Check on things. So what did you find?"

"Escott's telling the truth. His partner's a card-carrying, dusk-to-dawn, sleep-in-the-earth, teeth-in-the-neck, blood-drinking vampire."

"You believed him? Dr. Beeks too?"

"Yes and no. We're here, Beeks isn't. But. . ." he waved his hand at the mirror. ". . .that's plenty of proof for me. You and I have both seen enough old movies to know who or what is famous for not reflecting in mirrors."

"You don't reflect, Al," Sam pointed out.

"Because I'm a hologram!"

"Yeah, so maybe this guy is similar in some way to you, which means he doesn't have to be a vampire."

"Huh?"

"The question is, as an individual, is he part of our same universe or just slightly out of sync? The time differential might be too minute for us to notice, but a static object like a mirror could pick up the glitch. Or maybe he's not there at all and can tune directly into people's brain waves, but that wouldn't explain how you could see him—no—yes, since our brain waves are in tune, you're able to see him because I see him. But that wouldn't explain his solidity."

"Sam, you're babbling and none of it is making any sense."

"Yes, I know. Please stop me."

"Okay, I understand that you're the big scientist and you want to explain everything in a hard scientific way, but when you bump headfirst into something like this, then it's time to back off and smell the roses."

"Not under these circumstances, I won't. Whatever he is, there's nothing supernatural behind it. . ."

Al looked dubious. "Uh-huh."

"And what do you mean by that?"

"Like there's nothing supernatural about all the leaps you've done?"

"Those are scientifically—"

"Yeah, but it's the where and when that count. You always come at a time and place when you're most needed, Sam. How does your science account for that?"

Sam almost answered, then thought better of it. Al had him cold. "Think there're any roses around here?"

"We can always get a probability scan from Ziggy," Al suggested. "So... are you going to give up the scientific approach?"

"Let's just say I've suspended my disbelief for the time being. I'll pretend that there are more things in heaven and earth and all that for as long as I'm here."

"Good enough. I can see where you might have some problems despite the business with the mirror. I mean, he's got good color, isn't stalking around in a dinner suit and cape, and to top it all, he sort of looks like Jimmy Stewart."

"Who?"

Al was shocked. "You've seen his movies. It's A Wonderful Life? You used to watch it all the time during Christmas. Good grief, I wish we could do something about your memory."

Sam nodded in mournful agreement. "Okay, let's try changing the subject: why am I here?"

"To save Jack Fleming's life."

"What? I'm here to save a blood-drinking vampire's life?!"

"Or unlife," Al ventured.

"Why?"

"What d'ya mean 'why?' Because he's your friend, that's why."

"My friend?"

"Okay, Escott's friend." Al checked his link. "Ziggy got the dates right; these guys have been working together for the last twenty years, and if Escott's records are anything to go by, they've helped a lotta good people outta some bad jams. According to this, they're the good guys."

"Twenty years?"

"Yeah, Sam. There's another piece of proof for you. That kid and Escott are both fifty-six years old. Vampires don't age, y'know."

Sam didn't know, not for sure, anyway. "What about the blood-drinking? How is that possible? How can he be a good guy with that kind of habit?"

"Escott told us he doesn't live off human blood at all. He always goes to the Stockyards."

"The Stockyards?" Sam echoed blankly.

"He was pretty firm about that."

"The Stockyards? I don't get it."

"He feeds off the cattle there," Al explained.

The implications of what that involved struck home. "Ugh," said Sam.

"Yeah, I'll agree with you on that, but there are some people in undeveloped countries who eat worms and bugs, so who are we to judge another person's dining preferences?"

Sam decided not to think about it just now. "What happens to him?"

"We don't know exactly—"

"Not good enough, Al."

"—we just sort of know that it starts tonight."

"What starts?"

"Whatever it is that causes Fleming to disappear. The only information we have are some notes that Escott left behind when he investigated the case. He worked on it for a week and then. . ." Al spread his hands eloquently.

"A week and then what?"

"Escott disappeared, too. Ziggy ran ahead through the newspaper files and police records. A body fitting Escott's general description was found by some hunters about a year later in a shallow grave in Wisconsin, but there wasn't enough left of it to make a positive identification. Neither case was

ever solved."

The fluttering in Sam's stomach increased. "Escott's notes, what did they say?"

"Nothing much." Al consulted his link. "Only that it started when Fleming went out to Escott's office to get something and that's the last anybody saw of him."

Sam bolted from the room.

"What's with you?" Al demanded, appearing next to the closet downstairs where Sam was pulling on Escott's coat.

"Fleming's left already. I gotta go after him."

"You didn't stop him?"

"I didn't know I was supposed to." Sam found some keys in one of the pockets. "I hope these go to a car."

Al checked. "Yeah, there's one in a garage behind the house."

"Have Gooshie plot out a 1956 map to Escott's office and the fastest route there. You feed me the directions." Sam halted. "Can you center yourself on Fleming?"

"Uh, no. I wasn't here long enough to get a fix on him. I'm sorry."

Spilled milk, thought Sam, rushing out the door. Again.

The car was a vintage model, at least to Sam's eyes, and in perfect running order. And clean. No seat belts or head rests, though. Al fell in love with it.

"They just don't make 'em like this anymore. Solid, real value. Sure they guzzled the gas, but what a ride." He sat cross-legged on the seat, which meant that he was cross-legged on the Imaging Chamber floor.

"Wonderful, how do I start the damn thing?"

Al walked him through the process and Sam worked out the gears for himself, backing it from the narrow garage into an unfamiliar street. Al took over from there, telling him when to turn and keeping an eye open for traffic cops.

Now that they were on their way, Sam eased the tightness in his shoulders. "Does Gooshie have any information about who might want to kill either of these guys?"

"Yes. . ." Al read silently from his link. "And the list is depressingly long. Hoo boy, these guys have ruffled a lot of feathers in this burg."

"Any standouts from the crowd?"

"Hmm. Nope, he's dead, so's that one. . .this one's in prison, this one's insane. . .c'mon, Ziggy, give me something useful. Okay, we got some stuff coming through. Here we go. . .Connie O'Conner, got out of prison about a month back."

"Who's she?"

"She's a he. Ran a nasty little gang of toughs here for a while before Escott and, I presume, his partner busted their racket. Escott was instrumental in sending him and some others up for murder two years ago."

"He only served two years for murder?" Sam was outraged.

"He escaped. There's only a thirty-four percent chance that he's involved with this, but he has a bigger chunk of the percentage pie than anyone else on this list. The others are all five percent or lower."

"Then see what you can dig up on him."

"Right!" Al said.

"Good."

"I mean turn right!"

Sam swung the big car around. It took a lot of work without power steering. Al serenely drifted through Sam's body and completely out of the vehicle. Frowning with concentration, he worked the link and pulled himself back into the passenger's seat.

"This should be the place," he announced. "Your office is on the second floor. There's a stairwell in the center of the building that'll take you

straight up."

Sam pointed. "You think that's Fleming's car?"

"I dunno, lemme check. . .yeah, that's his."

"Great." Sam parked and charged down the street toward the stairs. They were narrow, old, not just to his own time, but to Escott's as well. Maybe the rent here was cheap. The chilly wind carried a pungent organic scent to him. No, make that a smell, which could only have originated from the Stockyards. The landmark's close proximity must have been very convenient for Fleming's use. Sam's mouth twisted and he resolved not to think about that again.

The wooden planks of the stairs cracked and creaked under his weight. He had no trouble choosing which door at the top to use; the one on the left showed bright light through its pebbled glass window. The printing announcing "The Escott Agency" was superfluous.

He was as silent as possible and crouched on the landing to keep his head below the level of the glass. He listened, but heard nothing.

The door abruptly opened inward. Sam started to back away, but the muzzle of a very large caliber gun swung into his line of sight. His eyes crossed trying to focus on it, it was so close.

Above him, someone said, "Well, if it ain't the old bloodhound himself, sniffin' out our trail." This was followed by some unpleasant laughter from within. "Stand up, old man, and join the party."

The muzzle bumped lightly against Sam's cheek. He rose slowly, keeping his hands visible. He faced three young men: two were strangers, on the large side and visibly armed. The third was Fleming. He was looking pretty annoyed.

"Charles, what the hell are you doing here?" he asked.

"I came after you. I had a feeling there might be some trouble tonight."

The young tough with the gun laughed again. "And you got it in spades, old man."

Al appeared in the room, glanced all around, and checked his link. "This is bad news, Sam."

"You're telling me," he sighed.

"Yeah," said the tough. "Two birds with one stone. And I thought Connie'd have to settle for just the one." His chin jutted in Fleming's direction.

"Okay," said Al. "That's confirmation enough for Ziggy. One of these guys has to be Tony 'the Goon' Morris, and he was Connie O'Conner's right hand man. I'll give you short odds on who the goon is in this bunch," he added, eyeing the tough. "There's a murder warrant out for him in Indiana, so watch yourself."

"O'Connor wants a little revenge, huh, Tony?" asked Sam.

"No," Tony shoved him over next to Fleming. "He wants a lot. You couldn't have come at a better time."

"I could debate that. What happened?" he asked Fleming.

He shrugged. "I was on my way out and they were on their way in. They waved their guns a lot to make sure I got real good and scared. Thought I'd stick around to see where they were going, then you turned up. It's going to complicate things with you along."

"Sorry to inconvenience you."

"I just don't want you getting hurt when I take 'em."

This last statement inspired more laughter. "He's full of it, ain't he? Lou, check the old man over. I'll make sure the big mouth behaves himself."

While Tony covered Fleming, Lou approached Sam and slapped him down. He found the Webley right away and tucked it into his belt. Fleming had either been disarmed earlier or hadn't been carrying anything in the first place. Sam felt the sweat creep out from the small of his back and grip him around the waist. His belly was tight with fear and he tried to shift away from it.

"Not yet," Fleming said quietly.

"He must think you're going to try something," Al suggested.

"I'm not," Sam murmured.

"Not what?" demanded Tony.

"Not going to move."

"Damn right."

"He's clean," said Lou, stepping clear.

"Do 'em up, then," Tony ordered.

Lou produced a set of heavy-looking handcuffs from a pocket. He fastened Fleming's hands behind his back, clicking them firmly into place. "Don't got a 'nother pair, Tony."

"Try the blinds."

With a grin, Lou flicked out a knife and sliced through some of the thin cord from the window blinds. Sam's hands were tied behind him with no thought for his comfort or circulation. Gesturing with the gun, Tony herded them out the door and down to the street. Lou ran ahead, called that things were clear, and then helped hustle them into the back of a dented, nondescript delivery van. Al followed in stages as he adjusted his location relative to Sam's.

"What's he waiting for?" he asked, nodding at Fleming. "If he's anything like what Escott's described, he should be able to handle these guys with his eyes shut."

Sam and Fleming were shoulder to shoulder on the floor of the van, their backs against the front partition. Tony turned on a small overhead light and sat at the rear by the double doors. Big as his gun was, he didn't seem to be tired of holding it. Lou was acting as driver. Through the metal walls, they heard him slam his door, start the motor, and grind the gears into action.

"What are you waiting for?" Sam asked Fleming, keeping his voice down, hoping that Tony wouldn't be able to hear clearly over the noise of the van.

"For the right moment."

"Sure it hasn't passed already?"

"I want them to take us to see Connie. You're not nervous, are you?"

"Tell him no, Sam," said Al. "Escott likes this sort of action, God help us."

"I'm fine," Sam lied. "I just wonder where we're going."

Fleming shrugged, but Al was punching things on his link. "You're heading west, Sam. I gotta bad feeling this buggy's going to wind up in Wisconsin. Uh-oh." Al frowned furiously and slapped the link. "Damn. I checked ahead to see if there's been any change in history because of you coming along, and there has."

Sam shot him a questioning glance.

Al shook his head and made a small, helpless gesture. "Now it says that two bodies will be found in that grave."

*

It was both the longest and shortest ride of Sam's life. He kept trying to wiggle his fingers so they wouldn't be totally useless when and if he ever got free. After a while, he lost all feeling in them. Al kept him updated at intervals on both their direction and how much time had passed. Throughout, nothing at all happened to alter Ziggy's grim projection about a double grave.

Their ride straightened and smoothed for quite a distance. Al checked their probable destination against his watch and announced he was going to go back to the lab.

"I want to see if I can goose Ziggy into finding more info on these creeps," he explained. "Besides, we gotta conserve power, but I'll be right back, buddy. I promise."

Sam nodded, making the gesture look like a result of the truck's movement. It was the logical, necessary thing to do, but the confined space suddenly grew more oppressive when Al was gone.

Fleming stirred uneasily, blinking his eyes and staring at the spot where

Al had stepped through. Sam pretended not to notice, hoping the man would shrug it off as he had before. How much did he see? What was it about his nature that made it possible for him to pick up on Al vanishing through his magic door?

Not, magic, he chided himself. Science. The kind of high level quantum physics that landed him here in the first place, to sit next to something right out of the dark ages: a vampire. So far, aside from his own paranoia fed by dozens of old horror movies, Sam had seen no evidence that Fleming was supernatural or in any way threatening. Except for being able to sense Al, a quality shared with others Sam had encountered, he looked and acted perfectly normal--or as normal as anyone could be given the conditions. He wasn't at all nervous, which implied a large store of confidence. On the other hand, something was going to happen to him tonight that would kill him--both of them. Could this Connie O'Connor know what he was and be waiting at the end of the road with a hammer and stake?

The simultaneous change of direction and reappearance of Al told him that their journey was ending.

"Almost there," he said unnecessarily. "It's some kind of shack in the middle of nowhere. The nearest house is five miles away and we're not sure if anyone's even home. I got some stuff on Tony here. He's been in and out of the joint all his life and you can trust him about as far as you can throw him, ditto for Lou if he's the same Lou Medora who used to run in this gang. These are big bad boys and you want to be extra careful with them."

Tell me something I don't know, Sam thought at him. The ride got very bumpy for a few minutes, tossing him and Fleming around like beans in a jar, then the truck suddenly stopped. They flopped against the front wall, Sam banging his head and elbows sharply.

Tony opened the doors and jumped down. Fresh cold air rolled in along with the constant rustling whisper of trees.

"Out, you two," he ordered.

Sam could barely move. Escott's body was feeling its age after such a long, uncomfortable confinement. Fleming was on his feet first, but could do little to help with his hands behind him. Sam managed to get to the door on his knees, then rocked back on his butt to swing his legs out. Hardly stylish, but it got the job done. He was yanked out by an impatient Lou. The clean, pine-scented air set off a coughing jag in Escott's smoke abused lungs. He took advantage of it, making it last longer than it would have in order to get a good look around. Nothing much to see, just the promised shack, a lot of trees, and a lot more dark. It was country darkness, thick and dangerous if you didn't know where you were going.

They pushed him and Fleming toward the shack where slivers of light escaped from the warped wood making up the shutters and door. The door opened, framing a man wearing a plaid shirt and khaki pants. He held a rifle easily in the crook of his arm and was grinning as if he'd just won a lottery. The grin, Sam realized, was an exceptionally nasty one, and it was directed at him.

"That's O'Conner," said Al, unconsciously dropping his voice. "Watch yourself with this one. He was judged sane enough to stand trial, but. . . just watch yourself. When he was in prison, he used to bite cockroaches in half and spit 'em across the room at people he didn't like."

I didn't need to know that, Sam's look told him.

"Sorry."

O'Conner stepped close to Sam and shoved the muzzle of his rifle under his chin. "Good to see you again, Escott. You did good, boys, got the boss and his errand boy."

"They practically gave themselves up, Connie," said Lou, sniggering.

"That's fine, the best news I've had all month. Did you know about my breakin' out, Escott? Huh?"

"I'd heard something along those lines," Sam replied.

"So maybe you figured I'd just forget about you and run off?"

No answer seemed to be required for that one. Besides, it was difficult to talk with the muzzle where it was. The cold metal was drawing any and all warmth away from Sam's flesh.

O'Conner had a full face, but somehow looked hungry. His eyes reinforced that impression, hard, avid, darting everywhere, childishly eager for something. "Take 'em inside. Lou, you get to work."

Lou's good humor faded. "Aw, hell, why me?"

"We'll spell you later. Just get started."

Lou got a flashlight from the truck, picked up a shovel leaning against the shack, and trudged off into the darkness beneath the trees.

"Sam. . ."

"I know," he said through his teeth to Al.

The muzzle dug into his chin. "You know what?"

"I know you must be pretty angry."

O'Conner laughed. "Not anymore. Now that you're here, I'm in a real good mood. Inside," he snapped, and the hard point of the muzzle whipped away. Tony shoved Sam forward and he stumbled into the shack. He tensed and relaxed almost in the same instant as he considered trying something then vetoed the attempt. His legs were still stiff from the long ride, not in any kind of shape for martial arts yet. His balance would be off with his hands behind him, too. Better to wait until the odds got better. . .if the chance ever came.

Fleming followed him in, looking strangely calm. Maybe he was thinking along the same lines. Sam hoped so.

Tony slammed the door shut behind them. O'Connor turned up the flame of a kerosene lantern sitting on an old crate. The gritty floor was littered with rolled up sleeping bags; one corner was piled high with discarded tin cans and other trash. That was the extent of the furnishings except for an ancient wood-burning stove which seemed to be the only source of heat for the place.

O'Conner noticed Sam's reaction. "Yeah, it's a dump, all right, but it's better than the joint. Not for too long, though. Once I'm done with you we're taking off for greener pastures."

"Like Canada?" asked Fleming.

"He guessed right, Sam," Al interjected. "These bozos drive straight up there tonight. Tomorrow Lou murders three border guards getting them all across. None of them are ever caught."

"The kid's got a brain in his head." O'Conner grinned. "And too much mouth for his own good."

"You won't make it, Connie. You need to listen to me on this." Fleming's eyes had grown sharper, more intense. "You really need to listen to me."

Sam felt the air change, or maybe it was inside his head. Like a belt tightening around his brain. What the hell was Fleming doing?

"Don't look at him," Al cautioned. "And don't move. I think he's trying to hypnotize this creep. It's one of the things he can do."

Hypnosis? Right. But Sam did as he was told. Instead of Fleming, he watched O'Conner. The man's expression clouded a little, just for a moment, then he shook his head and backed off a step.

"Listen to me. . ."

O'Conner struck out with his fist, connecting with Fleming's jaw to send him staggering into Tony, who was braced to catch him. Fleming stayed on his feet, his eyes blazing.

"Look at me, Connie."

But O'Conner was spooked. "The hell I will. Scrag 'em, Tony."

"No, wait!" But no one was listening to Sam.

Fleming threw himself against Tony, using his weight to smash the man against a wall. Tony lost his grip on his gun, which went skittering across

the floor.

O'Conner started forward, swinging the butt of his rifle up to take out Fleming. Sam launched toward him, his arms straining uselessly against their restraints. He managed to knock the man out of the way for a second. Only a second: O'Conner recovered just that fast and turned on Sam.

"You want it now?" he roared. "You've got it!" He raised the gun to his shoulder.

All or nothing. Instinctively, lightning fast, Sam kicked his leg out and up. His foot struck home between the rifle barrel and stock. O'Conner grunted in surprise, but rolled with the strike, maintaining his grip on the gun. His balance lost, Sam dropped flat, lying helpless as O'Conner brought the gun to bear again.

Then Fleming suddenly bulled into him. Both men crashed against the stove. O'Conner tried to use the rifle, but its length was too awkward for a close fight and Fleming wasn't allowing him to gain any distance. O'Conner caught on to this, slipped to one side, and clawed for something on the stove. Fleming pushed forward, trying to trip him.

O'Conner had grabbed a knife. Sam yelled a warning, but it was too late. O'Conner brought the long blade up square into Fleming's trunk, shoving it home just under the sternum. Fleming spasmed and choked, and tried to turn away. O'Conner wouldn't let him. Blood rushed from Fleming's wound onto his hand. He felt it, looked Fleming in the eye, and grinned. He pushed the knife in another inch, then let go and stood back.

Fleming's body arched as he desperately tried to twist his cuffed hands around, stretching his fingers toward the blade's handle. They fell short. A sob of frustration escaped his throat. Time slowed; minutes seemed to pass as he fought to get at the thing, to pull it free, but his strength was flowing out of him as swiftly as his blood.

Sam didn't know what held the man up. The knife was surely embedded in his heart. No one could survive that kind of a wound for so long, not even...

Fleming's legs folded. His knees struck the floor with a bone-cracking thud. He tried to speak, but Sam couldn't understand his breathless words. He was looking to him for help, silently pleading. His eyes traveled eloquently from the knife to Sam, then he toppled on his side. He moved feebly, as though trying to crawl toward him. Then he stopped moving altogether.

All Sam could hear was O'Conner's ragged breathing. Only gradually did he become aware of himself, the painful pounding of his heart, the racing of his blood. From some far away place he thought he heard Al's voice, but it didn't seem too terribly important. Nothing in the world was as important as wiping that grin from O'Conner's face and smashing what was left into a pulp.

He was upright and moving—using someone else's legs and body, but motivated by his own rage. Despite his restricted arms he got the balance right, the distance correctly judged. His leg swung up; the edge of his shoe slammed home. He felt no pain, only solid impact, and things snapping beneath in reaction.

O'Conner dropped like a bag of bricks.

Sam was unable to land as he'd been trained, to spare himself. The floor came up fast and hard. He thumped heavily onto its unforgiving surface. The shock of landing paralyzed him for an eternity, then he was laboriously fighting to replace the air that had been completely knocked from his lungs.

Al was kneeling beside him, searching his face. His arms were spread as though to touch him, to help him, but that was impossible, of course.

"O'Conner?" he gasped, barely able to form the syllables.

Al turned away and crouched over a sprawl of arms and legs. "He's not moving, Sam. I think you broke his neck. Tony's. . ." Al crossed the shack to check on the other man. ". . .out for the count. At least Fleming got one before they got him."

"Oh, God." Failure. His worst nightmare. To leap into a situation and not change things. The full horror of it washed over Sam, draining him of

thought, of will, leaving only a surfeit of despair.

"I know, Sam. I know. But you gotta save it for later. Lou is still out there. If you don't pull yourself together right now, you're gonna lose Escott."

It was too much to expect of him. Too much. "Damn," he whimpered.

"That's good, if you can cuss, you can fight." Al half-begged, half-ordered him. "Now get on your feet."

Sam got as far as his knees. Fleming lay curled right in front of him. His mouth was slack, his eyes slightly open, but he was still, stone still. Those empty eyes seemed to follow Sam as he moved, though, pleading with him.

Al fidgeted. "You gotta get those ropes off, somehow. Lemme see if I can find something for you."

But there was only one knife within Sam's reach. The thought sickened him, but Fleming was past caring now. Sam put his back to him.

"Oh, jeez, Sam," said Al, realizing what he was trying to do. He gulped, then offered directions. "Down a little more, left. . .your left. . . just a little more."

Sam couldn't feel anything; he had to trust Al's word that his hand had closed over the knife's handle. He grasped—or rather his brain sent out the message to do so—and pulled as instructed. The thing was slippery with blood; the shack reeked of it. His universe focused down to those two points: the need to get the knife and the metallic smell of Fleming's blood.

It took him several tries before it finally came free. He couldn't keep hold, though. He heard it clatter against the floor. He groaned in frustration.

"That's okay," Al assured him. "Now I can tell you how to. . .to. . ."

Sam looked up at his change in tone, half expecting to hear that Lou was about to walk in.

"Oh, my God. . ." Al stared at something behind Sam's back. Not waiting for explanations, he turned to see for himself.

Fleming's eyes had closed. A moan came from his lips. Sam's gut turned to water. He forgot how to breathe. Frozen to a statue himself, he watched Fleming's whole body shift slightly, as if seeking a more comfortable position.

Then he just wasn't there.

Sam gaped at the empty spot on the floor. There'd been no flash of light, no stream of mist, no sign whatsoever. He was just gone. Sam felt something cold brush over him. Like someone walking over my grave. It was intense, but mercifully brief.

Al's eyes were popping. "Holy cats, Escott said he could disappear, but I didn't want to believe him."

"Disappear?" Sam whispered, not sure if he really wanted have it confirmed.

Al stared at his link. "I think he's still in here, Sam. I'm picking up. . .I don't know what I'm picking up." He tracked around the room, facing something Sam couldn't see. "He's over there by Tony. . .now he's moving. . . oh, hell, this is weird. Now he's coming this way. . ." Al backed off, then halted. "He's just in front of you, Sam. Moving again . . .forget that, he's just in front of me! I think he can see me, Sam!"

"What?"

Al went several shades of pale. "Gooshie, put me outside, now!" Then Al was gone. His way of vanishing was identical to Fleming's.

"Oh, boy." Sam moaned miserably to himself.

The patch of cold brushed close to him again. Sam shut his eyes, too tired to care what happened next. He reluctantly opened them when footsteps made the floor creak.

Fleming had returned. His clothes were soaked with blood all down the front. He looked terribly ill and frail, and swayed on uncertain legs, but he definitely wasn't dead anymore. His arms were free; the still-closed

handcuffs dangled from one finger.

Sam swallowed with some difficulty.

He gingerly held the spot where the knife had gone in and winced. "That one nearly did the job this time," he muttered. "What about you? You okay?"

Sam couldn't answer. He didn't trust himself. Fleming knelt and got the knife and gently cut through the cords. Sam could barely stand to bring his arms forward, the stiffness was so bad.

Fleming rubbed his wrists to help the circulation. "I'm sorry, Charles. I should have headed these jerks off from the start. I can't tell you how sorry I am."

"It's okay. I'm just glad you're alive. I thought that--"

"So did I." Fleming looked past to O'Conner's body. "What did you do to him? I saw your kick, but you've never used that move before."

"I just got mad, is all."

"Some kind of mad, buddy. You saved both our hides this time."

The discomfort marking the return of blood to his hands distracted Sam from making any heroic speeches, not that he had the stomach for any. His fingers still felt like they didn't belong to him. Well, technically, they didn't.

"There's something else, Charles. . .when I vanished there was. . ." Fleming's face pinched up with concentration and puzzlement.

"What?"

"I heard a guy talking. It was like a radio that had been left on, except I could see him. . .well, maybe not exactly <u>see</u>, but <u>feel</u>."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that there was something else in here with us."

Sam gave him a skeptical look. "'Something else?'"

"Some<u>one</u> else, then. A man--and he knew I was here. I could hear him talking about me, then he told somebody named Gooshie to get him out."

"Gooshie?"

"That's what I heard. What did you hear?"

"I didn't hear anything."

"But I did. I'm not mistaken on this."

"It might have been an hallucination brought on by your--ah--weakened condition. There's nothing here now, is there?"

Fleming looked around, doubtful. "I don't know. This was when I'd vanished. I might only be able to sense it then."

Sam tried humor to distract him. "Maybe it was a ghost. This place is pretty old. . ."

Fleming bristled. "C'mon, Charles. A ghost? There ain't no such animal."

"Like there's no such thing as a vampire?"

Instead of arguing, Fleming considered the comment. "Maybe you've got an idea there. I'm going to have a look around."

He vanished. Just Like Al.

Sam jumped, then wilted. "Oh, God, I'm not ready for this." Eyes wide, he searched every inch of the shack, but there was absolutely no sign, sound or feeling of the man. . .vampire. . .whatever. . .

Al poked his head cautiously through one wall. "Gooshie said it was clear in here. Is it?"

"How the hell should I know? You're the one with the link. Go back to the lab for a while. It's safer." He wasn't up to talking just yet, not even to Al.

"Good idea." Al's door whooshed open and shut.

Sam's hands vibrated under the onslaught of an army of pins and needles. Tony was still unconscious, but to be on the safe side, he tied him up, using the remains of the cord. It was a slow and clumsy process. He didn't know what to do about O'Conner just yet.

<u>So why haven't I leaped</u>? Now would be a really good time.

Lou. He was still out there in the darkness digging a grave. Or was he? It had been a while. If he got tired of the work, or heard the commotion and came to investigate. . . . Better safe than sorry; Sam reached for the lamp and put it out.

Just as a gun went off.

He hit the floor and rolled. The bullet had missed. He didn't know where it had gone, only that it had come right through the flimsy wall from the outside. He couldn't see anything and his ears were still ringing from the blast. Blind and deaf, he flailed out, his hands encountering a body. Tony or O'Conner? Not that it mattered—yes, it did. Sam squinted. It seemed to be Tony and when he'd fallen, his gun had been thrown. . .over there. Sam scrabbled on his knees, his numbed fingers questing everywhere.

Another shot. It sounded like a cannon. Lou must have been using Escott's gun.

Sam's hand blundered into a deadly metal shape. His fingers closed hard, one slotting inside the trigger guard, his palm wrapping around the grip. He waited for several heartbeats. No other sounds, no more shots. Fleming. . .he hoped Fleming had thought to go to ground. Not knowing where he was, Sam didn't dare shoot back. On the other hand, was the man as bulletproof as he was knife-proof?

Shot.

Sam ducked.

Shot.

But nothing was coming at him.

Shot.

The bullets were going somewhere else.

Shot, then. . .

Silence. A silence almost as loud as the gun—

—ended by an inhuman shriek bursting from a very human throat that coursed through Sam's body like an electric current. As the last shocked echo died, he staggered up and made it to the door, wrenching it open.

A flashlight was on the ground a few yards away. Its cone of brightness picked out Lou's inert form where he lay on his back nearby. Standing over him was Fleming. He was holding Escott's Webley by the muzzle and staring down at Lou.

Sam walked toward him, slowly. "Jack?"

Fleming turned sluggishly. Sam saw the fresh holes torn into the clothes on his chest and back, entry and exit. . .wounds? He looked dazed and frail, but still kept to his feet.

Sam checked Lou. The man was alive with no visible damage on him, but unconscious. Deeply so.

"He'll be asleep for a while," Fleming finally said. The wind nearly carried his words away unheard.

Asleep. That was reassuring.

"Tried to get to him before he could—"

"It's okay," Sam said hastily. He didn't like the flat tone he was hearing. "I think you should go in and sit down."

"Yeah." Without looking, Fleming handed the Webley to Sam.

"I'll be right with you."

"Yeah." Fleming moved hesitantly, eyes fixed on nothing in particular.

Frowning, Sam put the borrowed gun in his coat pocket, then stowed the Webley away in its holster. His own movements were nearly as robotic as Fleming's; they had to be. If he stopped to think about things, he might not get started again.

The next problem was Lou. Asleep or not, Sam wanted to keep an eye on him. Hands under his arms, he dragged the man up to the shack, backing his way through the open door. The lantern was still out. Sam got an inspiration and checked Escott's clothes. Sure enough, he found a pipe, tobacco pouch, and a box of matches. He'd go back for the flashlight in a minute, right now he

wanted to see what was going on around him.

Not much, fortunately. Fleming had stopped in his tracks just to one side of the entrance. His arms were folded around himself as though to keep his body from flying apart.

"Jack?"

He started as if he'd been poked with a stick. "Not good," he said. It had a disconnected sound, as though he'd been carrying on an internal conversation and Sam had intruded. "Maybe still. . .oh, hell." Fleming sighed like a deflating balloon, then sat down on the floor rather suddenly, his head bowed as if to pray. Sam reached out to him.

"What's the matter? Jack?" Sam checked the man's eyes. His pupils were dilated and he didn't seem to be able to focus very well. He tried to find a pulse. There was none. Abruptly going hollow inside, he thought, This is a vampire, a dead man. . .

"Vanishing helped heal me some," Fleming mumbled, "closed me up. Shouldn't have taken those shots. Tipped things. Too much damage. Running on empty now."

Hot prickles of fresh fear ran up Sam's neck into his scalp. "What do you mean?"

"I don't feel so good, Charles." His face confirmed it, made it an understatement. He was drained and drawn. Older.

"You mean you need more blood? Now?" Sam didn't recognize the voice coming out of him.

Fleming nodded.

"From me?"

Startled by the suggestion, Fleming's jaw dropped. "No! My God, I couldn't ask you to do that again."

Again? Sam questioned faintly. "Then what. . . ?"

His hand waved hesitantly at Lou's unconscious form. "I didn't know what you'd think if I just. . .I mean, you know I don't go after people for food. But this. . ."

The hot prickles turned cold. "But this is an emergency?"

"I wish to God it wasn't. Thought I could wait. . .find a farm. . .an animal. . .not strong enough to wait." Fleming shuddered, collapsing in upon himself.

Sam's mouth had gone dry. Was thirst like this for Fleming? Or was it something far worse? "You're going to have to kill him?" he whispered.

"Sweet Jesus, Charles, of course not. Just enough to keep me alive. . . swear it won't hurt him. . .he won't even know."

"Wouldn't vanishing again help?"

"Might not come back." His voice had dropped, grown thinner. He was deteriorating as Sam watched.

He accepted that it was an emergency, but Sam still had to fight the nausea stirring in his belly. What Fleming was requesting wasn't too terribly different from a blood transfusion, except that it wouldn't be coming from a clean plastic bag to be fed directly into a vein—he would be drinking it.

Drinking it.

"Charles?"

Sam pushed out everything cluttering his mind, everything that was getting between him and helping this. . .man. He got an arm around Fleming's waist and lifted him a little in the right direction. Lou was still oblivious. Sam thought unhappily about concussion. If he'd sustained one, then he'd have to ask Fleming to. . .to take blood from another source. He moved to check on him, but driven by his need, Fleming moved faster.

He'd expected him to go for the man's throat; instead, he simply shoved up the sleeve of one out-flung arm. His mouth sagged wide. Sam caught a glimpse of his teeth, of the canines jutting out more than the others, then Fleming's lowering head blocked his view of what came next.

Sam heard and felt his own blood thundering hard in his ears while all

around them the universe receded and fell silent.

*

Rubies. Fleming's eyes were blood-red rubies; living rubies that could strip a man to his soul. Their color made them alien, terrifying, but framed as they were in a weary, pain-marred face they were all too human again. At first they fascinated Sam, then he found it difficult not to flinch away. He looked at Lou's arm instead. There were two small holes on the skin, and a little mottling around the damaged area from broken capillaries, but no other signs of what had happened.

"He'll be all right," Fleming said. He sounded much stronger, more normal. "His heartbeat's regular. There shouldn't be any problems."

Sam decided not to ask him how he knew that.

"When that bastard left the knife in . . ." his shoulders shifted as he remembered the agony. "If you hadn't been around to pull it out I don't know what would have happened to me, but my God, I didn't mean to put you through this."

"Don't worry about it." A weight, an extremely heavy weight was melting from Sam's soul. He gladly let it do so.

Fleming had dragged himself off to rest against the wall of the shack, stretching out his long legs and throwing back his head. Sam watched him, seeing and sensing on some sub-level of consciousness the return of vitality to the loose limbs and shrunken skin. Step right up, folks, and try the new miracle elixir: human blood. Live forever or die trying.

Sam concluded that it was past time to leave.

"Think I'll check on the truck," Fleming announced unexpectedly. He found his feet slowly, stalking from the shack with detached care. Sam didn't believe his statement so much as his need to be alone. It was something with which he could wholeheartedly sympathize.

He stirred himself as well, unrolling one of the sleeping bags and spreading it over Lou. It would keep him warm until they could get him to--

Whoosh.

"Sam, there's been a change in the records," began Al. "Holy smoke, what's going on? You look worse than when I left you."

"What's changed?" Sam was in no mood to provide updates.

"It's gone back to the original history, sort of, almost. A year from now those hunters find that grave, only now it's back to being just one body again."

"An unsolved case for the police?"

"Yeah. But with a difference: they put the cause of death down as being a broken neck." Al stopped cold and looked at O'Conner. "So that means you and Fleming must have buried him there. Aw, Sam, how could you do that?"

Sam couldn't, but Escott might. "I think it's because we have to, because of Fleming. You said he was invisible when it came to a records search. He's invisible because he has to be. Because of what he is."

Al considered it. "I guess you're right. I suppose with his condition he has to be careful about drawing attention to himself. There's too many people out there that wouldn't understand things. Myself included," he added sheepishly.

"What else have you got? Anything more on Escott?"

"Let's see, Tony and Lou. . .turn themselves in? That doesn't sound right." Al thumped the unit impatiently. "Maybe it is. Anyway, Lou's not going to kill those border guards."

"Good."

"You changed other things, Sam. It looks like--yeah, it's coming in now. Escott goes on with his agency, but we don't have much on Fleming except that their partnership ended."

"Ended?"

"We've got Fleming's regularly filed tax returns, but from a different address and he doesn't list Escott as his employer anymore. Wonder what happened?"

Sam went over to the door. The chill wind stirred his hair and plucked at his clothes. The flashlight still lay where it had fallen, its beam just beginning to yellow. He rushed forward and picked it up. Fleming wasn't anywhere in sight.

"He's out there," he said, when Al popped in next to him. "He's just wandering around in the dark by himself. I thought he wanted to be alone."

"Sometimes that's not the right thing to be, Sam. He may need a friend right now."

"Then Escott should be here, not me."

Al glanced up at the sky, but no answer dropped from it. "Maybe this is something you can do, but Escott can't."

Sam said nothing. Eventually, he left and walked into the trees.

He found what might have been a deer trail and followed it. He soon came upon a shovel lying abandoned across the path; a yard or two beyond was a start of a long, narrow hole in the ground. The scent of the freshly turned earth might have been wholesome to him any other time, but not now.

Fleming was there, squatting on his haunches, staring down into it.

"Jack?"

"Yeah, I'm coming."

"There's no hurry."

"Wanna bet, pal? The sun's never waited on me before."

"Why are you here?"

"I wanted to see where I was supposed to end up. Not much better than Lake Michigan, is it? Don't mind me, I'm in a morbid mood."

"Would it help to talk?"

"About what? The kind of crap that eats me in half from the inside out? You don't want to hear that."

"Yes, I do."

Fleming looked up, surprised by his statement.

Sam nodded, plunging into an area that Escott might have left alone. "Tell me."

Fleming took his time, with false starts and a few halts, but apparently the most difficult part of the process was starting at all.

"It's a lot of things, like that guy, Lou, what I did to him. I swore I'd never do that to anyone else again, but when I felt the stuff going out of me. . .felt myself going. . ." His voice cracked.

"It was an emergency. You had to do it to survive."

"And if I hadn't been here. . ." He stopped a moment, a very long moment, before continuing in a dreary, hopeless monotone, his eyes focused hard on the grave. "I shouldn't have been. I screwed this whole mess up from the start by playing things like some grandstanding idiot. It's one thing for me to risk myself, but I had no right to put you through this."

"So you've said before, but you're the last person I'd hold responsible for me winding up in this situation. If it's anyone's fault. . .no, it's nobody's fault. You did what you thought was best. Second-guessing the future or re-writing the past is somebody else's problem, not yours. The present is complicated enough."

He shook his head. "Yeah, right, everything's peachy. So let's talk about the present, then. I may still look like a kid, but when I see you I know I'm not. Fifty-six, Charles. Neither of us are kids anymore. It's time to quit. Quit before our luck runs out."

"Are you telling me that I'm too old for this kind of work? That I should stop?"

"After tonight, don't you think so?"

"I think you should let me decide that for myself."

"You could have died tonight."

"So could you. Both of us. But we didn't—and there's a reason for what happened and the way it happened."

"Why don't you tell me what it is?"

Sam floundered. "That's not something I or anyone else can say, but there is a purpose behind all of it." He thought of the other men who would live now. "A good one, I'm sure. All any of us can do is keep going, doing the best we can no matter what. When we stop trying, then the bad guys win by default."

Fleming shook his head. "But they're always there. Don't you just get tired of it?"

"God, yes, I get tired, but if I give up now, I might as well finish the work on that and crawl in." Sam gestured at the long hole before them. "I think that's why we've both been around for the last fifty-six years. Or even the last twenty."

The wind sighed indifferently. Sam felt the cold settling over his body, sinking into his abused muscles. Fleming didn't seem to be affected, either because of what he was, or by the thoughts streaming through his mind.

"You know what I figure?" Fleming finally asked him.

"What?"

"That I'm here to keep your ass out of trouble. It's the least I can do after landing you in it."

"Or maybe it's the other way around. Or maybe it's both."

After another long pause, Fleming snorted, but not derisively, and stood. "I guess we'll just have to wait and find out."

"You ready to go home?" Sam asked hopefully.

"Not yet." Fleming spat into the grave. "First, I have to bury some garbage."

Sam started to speak, then realized it was unnecessary. It was time.

Fleming strode past him and stooped to pick up the shovel. His back was turned, otherwise he, of all people, might have seen it happen.

- The End -

[P.N. Elrod is the author of THE VAMPIRE FILES starring Jack Fleming. These are available from ACE Science Fiction. Titles include:

BLOODLIST
LIFEBLOOD
BLOODCIRCLE
ART IN BLOOD
FIRE IN BLOOD
BLOOD ON THE WATER

The first novel in THE ADVENTURES OF JONATHAN BARRETT (also from ACE Science Fiction) will appear June 1993. Set in the latter half of the eighteenth century, RED DEATH brings back vampire Jonathan Barrett, first introduced in BLOODCIRCLE.

Other vampire tales by Elrod include "You'll Catch Your Death", upcoming in the anthology VAMPIRE DETECTIVES (Pulphouse Publications), and the short story "The Wind Breathes Cold," in a new anthology DRACULA, PRINCE OF DARKNESS, (DAW Books) to be released in June. It will coincide with the release of the movie Stoker's Dracula, starring Anthony Hopkins as Van Helsing.]

T H E C R O S S R O A D S

THE SMELL OF SWEAT
AND FEAR FILL THE
NIGHT TIME AIR
WALK THE CROSS
ROADS IF YOU DARE
THE TOWN FOLK CAME
TO SEE HE WHO
DRINKS THE BLOOD
THAT OF THE HUMAN
TYPE AT THE CROSS
ROADS UNDER THE
PALE MOON LIGHT
HE SHALL FIND FATE AT THE END OF A NOOSE
AT THE CROSS ROADS HE SHALL FIND DEATH
ONLY TO BE CUT LOOSE THEN THE WOODEN
STAKE SHALL RUN THROUGH HIS HEART AT THE
CROSS ROADS LIFE SHALL PART CUT OFF HIS
HEAD AT THE CROSS ROADS YET IS HE DEAD?
CAST HIM INTO THE
HOT FIRE AT THE
CROSS ROADS SHALL
HE MAKE DEATH
A LIAR WHEN THE
FIRE BURNS LOW
FROM THE CROSS
ROADS THE TOWNFOLK
WILL FLOW THE UN-
DEAD SHALL WALK TO
NIGHT AT THE CROSS
ROADS IN THE PALE
M O O N L I G H T



INCUNABULA

by

Margaret L. Carter

A knock at the door woke Denise from her doze on the lumpy couch. She glanced at the black and white flicker of the TV screen, then at the digits on her watch. After eleven. Grumbling, she dropped the book from her lap, tugged her forest-green William and Mary sweat shirt over the waistband of her jeans, and plodded to the door. Her hand on the knob, she blinked further awake and hesitated. Jack the Ripper? On the wooded verge of a restored Colonial town inhabited half by college students and half by tourists? She raked her fingers through her unfashionably long, straight, chocolate-brown hair and opened the door.

Her rented house stood at the end of a narrow lane with no street light except at the corner where it met the county road. To see who waited on the sagging wooden porch, Denise had to switch on the overhead lamp. She confronted a face that made her wonder if she were still dreaming. *Wuthering Heights* had teleported her into the *Twilight Zone* rerun she'd been watching, for here was Heathcliff in the flesh.

Actually, there was nothing brooding or menacing about her old friend Nigel Jamison. His curling black hair and smoky gray eyes, however, befitted a hero of Victorian romance. Leaning against the doorjamb, arms folded, he looked down at her with a casual smile of greeting more suited to high noon than the middle of the night. His charcoal-gray slacks and alligator-adorned navy shirt made her feel like hiding her tousled self in a closet.

"Glad I caught you at home, Denise."

His voice, after almost two years, still resonated through all the cavities of her body. Damn. What right had he to show up at this unearthly hour, after his infrequent one-page letters, and still have such a devastating effect on her? "Nigel, is it you or a ghostly visitation? And if not the latter, why couldn't you pick a more civilized time?"

"It's not exactly a short drive from Charlottesville to here," he said, "and you know I don't like to drive before dark, which comes fairly late in the middle of June." Nigel, in addition to numerous other allergies, suffered from photosensitivity.

"Then you could've at least phoned first."

"I was afraid you might refuse to let me visit," he said with the slow smile that had always torn her better judgment to shreds. "I figured you'd be less likely to slam the door on me in person." Inhaling deeply of the humid air, he added, "It really is a beautiful night, but I'd hoped you would let me in."

"Oh, all right," she sighed. "I hate to admit it, but I'm glad to see you." This meeting was their first since his graduation from William and Mary, in the class ahead of Denise's. While he'd entered the University of Virginia's Ph.D. program in psychology, she had stayed in Williamsburg to pursue an M.A. in English, a degree that she sometimes thought was fleeing from her at supersonic speed.

She felt no embarrassment about admitting Nigel to her four-room furnished house. He knew what a graduate student's stipend would bear, though money had

never posed a problem for him. He stretched out on the faded floral-print couch, arms flung wide along the back cushions, claiming, in typical masculine style, more than his share of space.

Switching off the TV, Denise said, "Now that you're here, can I get you a drink?"

"Milk." She might have guessed; he seldom drank anything else. After bringing him a glass, she poised expectantly on the edge of the rocking chair. Let Nigel make the next move, blast him. After a leisurely survey of her Arthur Rackham fairy tale prints on the wall, he said, "Actually, I drove down here to ask you a favor."

Aha! she mentally pounced.

"A pretty big one," he said, uncharacteristically diffident. "Denise--am I wrong to think you care about me?"

You're not wrong, damn you, she silently grumbled. You shameless manipulator! If he'd asked, two years before, she would probably have married him. Her face tingled with heat. Her only consolation, through those years when they'd maintained an anomalous "best friends" relationship, had been his total lack of interest in other women. Or men, for that matter.

When his silence stretched beyond a normal conversational pause, she said, "Well, what if I do? What's the favor?"

"You still work in the reference department at the college library, don't you?"

"Sure."

He finished the milk and set the glass on the coffee table next to a stack of nineteenth century fiction journals. "To put it bluntly, I want you to help me steal a book from Special Collections."

She gaped at him. "I always thought you were a little strange. Now I know you're crazy. Nigel, that's in a different category from lending you my English notes when you fell asleep in class."

"This isn't how I'd have chosen to spend the weekend, either," he chuckled. "My guardian wants me to get possession of the book." Nigel had no close family, as far as Denise knew, and she'd never met this shadowy guardian --whether uncle, great-uncle, or distant cousin--who was so lavish with material wealth and eccentric commands.

"Then he's nuts, too," she said. But curiosity wouldn't let her drop the subject. "What book are you supposed to steal, and why?"

"You know about the Ashleigh collection?" said Nigel.

"Of course." The college's acquisition of Winston Ashleigh's British incunabula and Colonial American publications, worth unspecified thousands of dollars, was a major triumph for William and Mary's library. Several university presses vied for the privilege of publishing a limited facsimile edition of selected books in the collection.

Nigel said, "The book my guardian's interested in happens to be one of those scheduled for the facsimile reprint series. My family has a reason for not wanting that particular book made public. Three other copies of the work are known to exist, and we have them all. The copy owned by the Ashleigh clan was no problem as long as it stayed locked in their private library. Now it's a different matter."

Nigel delivered this speech in such a serious tone that Denise really did wonder if he'd run off the rails. "Wonderful. You not only want me to help steal an old book; you want me to steal a rare, valuable old book."

"Come on, think of it as a harmless student prank."

"You preppies may call it a prank," she said. "We members of the bourgeoisie adhere to higher standards." Denise's private moral code counted violating the sanctity of a library as a sin slightly less heinous than murder.

What has the man done to me? I'm actually arguing this lamebrained notion as if there's some chance I'll cooperate.

He leaned forward, elbows resting on his knees, capturing her eyes with his own. Those incredible gray eyes-- "Won't you trust me on the importance of this, Denise?"

She felt dizzy for a second. She must not be completely awake yet. "Good grief, you're serious. I don't see you trusting me very far. You haven't told me what's so vital about this book."

"Fair point," he conceded. "After--if--we manage to get hold of it, I'll show you what's in it. If not, the whole question will be moot."

"What do you need me for, anyway? Do your own criminal work."

"You know the layout of the library. You can save me time and confusion. Also, you possess a car that's a lot less conspicuous than mine and has a William and Mary parking sticker."

"You're crazy," she persisted, though somehow her heart wasn't in the argument anymore. "There's not a snowball's chance of getting anything out of the Rare Books Room, much less out of the building."

"We can but try."

"And if we--you--don't succeed, I'm the one who gets thrown out of school and into jail."

"Oh, you won't get into trouble. I guarantee that."

That ridiculously casual assurance topped everything he'd said so far. Why not humor him? Denise thought. As soon as the attempt proved how hopeless his scheme was, he'd give up and leave. "All right, anything to shut you up. We'd better hurry. The library closes at twelve on Fridays this time of year." She ducked into the bedroom for her purse and keys.

Nigel's smile hinted that he suspected the motive behind her sudden capitulation, but he held the door for her without a word. Outside, a cluster of mosquitoes orbited the porch light. The fragrance of honeysuckle hung thick in the air. A rabbit erupted from a forsythia bush and bolted for the woods. "I like your location," said Nigel. "You have much wildlife this close to town?"

Denise shrugged. "Possums and raccoons, sometimes a deer." Both rabbits and felonies vanished from her thoughts at the sight of Nigel's car. A silver Corvette was parked behind her gas-hoarding, Junebug-green compact. "Good Lord, I see what you mean by 'conspicuous.'" Last time she'd seen Nigel, he'd been driving a Porsche. Who was that guardian of his, the Godfather?

"I'll take you for a ride later, if there's time," he said complacently, opening the driver's door of her car for her.

"No, thanks, I remember how you drive!" Once they were both belted in, she eased the car from the gravel-surfaced lane onto the main road and headed for the historic district. After turning the corner at a field bounded by a split-rail fence, she drove past a row of restored Georgian houses, the eighteenth-century powder magazine, and the back lot of the King's Arms.

"Speaking of trust," said Nigel, "the details of what I'm after aren't my secret to tell, not without firmer justification."

"Like having a felony to hold over my head?"

"If you care to put it that way," he grinned.

Shortly they reached the triangle where the James and York highways made a V with Duke of Gloucester Street. The campus fanned back from the Christopher Wren building, focus of several brick-paved paths. Denise turned up the left arm of the V toward the newer buildings. Pulling into the nearly deserted library parking lot, she said, "If you're not going to succumb to a sudden attack of sanity, you could at least tell me what we're looking for."

"Yes, of course," he said. "It's a book printed in 1497, written by an obscure English priest named Geoffrey Hillyard. The title translates from Latin as *A True Relation of the Portent Known as the Demon of Corville*."

"This is so vital you have to steal it?" She twisted the ignition key with unnecessary force. "Never mind. Let's get this over with."

They entered through the turnstile at the circulation desk. Denise waved a greeting to her friend Joan at the check-out station, glad Joan was too busy with a patron to show curiosity about Nigel. Denise and Nigel crossed to the elevator, which was otherwise empty as they rode it down to the ground floor. Crossing the dimly-lit circular lobby to the Rare Books Room, she found herself groping for his hand. His grip was firm and cool. Feeling her heartbeat accelerate, she knew her own palm must be damp. The larger-than-life statue of a Colonial Virginia

governor that dominated the lobby seemed like an embodiment of her conscience.

"Don't be so nervous," Nigel said. "Your face fairly screams guilt."

She jumped. In the carpeted chamber, his low voice seemed to echo through the silence. "It's him." She nodded at the statue, trying to speak lightly. "A hostile *genius loci*."

Nigel's gray eyes mocked her qualms.

"I just remembered, the Rare Books Room is closed by now," she whispered.

"Exactly why I brought you along. There's still a staff member on duty, isn't there?"

Denise nodded.

"Excellent, the doors won't be locked. We're using the back entrance, which you are going to show me."

"Nigel, where is your grip on reality tonight? Whoever's at the desk would hear us banging around in the back room for sure!" She had to fight to hold her voice to a furious whisper.

"I'll take care of that. Wait here."

He strode to the door and entered, leaving it ajar. Denise, lurking in the shadows and hoping the librarian, a middle-aged blonde woman she knew slightly, wouldn't notice her in the dim light of the lobby, watched Nigel walk up to the desk.

"Sir, we're closed until--"

Nigel said, "Terribly sorry to bother you, but I've driven all the way from Charlottesville. It's rather urgent."

Before Denise quite grasped how he'd got that far, he was sitting on the edge of the desk, turning the full candlepower of his smile on the bewildered librarian. Did he think masculine charm could bend the rules?

Yet, to Denise's surprise, the woman gazed at Nigel as if a strange man practically nesting in her Out Box were an everyday occurrence. He lightly fingered a wisp of blonde hair snagged on the earpiece of her wire-rimmed glasses. "You'll make an exception this time, won't you?" he murmured.

The librarian blinked as if trying to break a trance and slowly shook her head.

Instead of giving up, Nigel lowered his voice to a croon whose words Denise couldn't distinguish. The woman gazed wide-eyed at him as he stroked her hair, the light touch becoming more blatantly a caress every minute. Gradually her lids drooped shut.

Though inwardly sizzling with irrational jealousy, Denise was too puzzled to interfere. She hadn't suspected Nigel of such refined skill in hypnosis. He eased the woman's head onto the padded back of the swivel chair and said, "You will sleep for the next hour, unless someone disturbs you earlier. Then you will wake naturally and lock up according to your usual routine. You won't remember meeting me. I was never here. Nobody was here."

Stepping back from the desk, he surveyed his work with evident satisfaction. He rejoined Denise and shut the door. "That should hold. Come on. We've no time to waste."

Automatically responding to his brisk tone, Denise led the way down the hall to the staff entrance. "Nigel, how did you hypnotize her so fast?"

He shrugged. "I'm a psych major."

Yes, but his specialty was theoretical, not clinical. And she'd never heard of a subject falling into a deep trance so promptly.

They tiptoed to the door of the work area behind the Rare Books Room. When Denise hesitated, Nigel said, "Relax, it's deserted--I don't hear anybody."

They stepped into the windowless room, hardly bigger than a walk-in closet. Nigel shut the door before turning on the overhead light. Denise inhaled the comfortable smell of dust, aged leather, and musty paper. Books were piled on the shelves lining each wall, along with a few electric typewriters and microfilm-reading machines. Five wooden crates sat in the middle of the floor.

"That would be the Ashleigh collection," said Denise. "You're really going through with this."

"Well, I didn't mesmerize the lady out there for the sheer pleasure of it."

She drew a deep breath and glared at him. "This has gone far enough. A joke is a joke, but I'm ready to leave now."

He cupped her chin and stared into her eyes. Suddenly the foot of difference between their heights seemed to stretch until he loomed over her. "Denise, dear girl, you don't want to fight me on this, do you?"

She felt lightheaded. Of course she didn't want to resist him. She only wanted to drift in the misty gray of his eyes. No! He's doing it to me, now! She jerked out of his grasp, and he didn't try to hold her. "Forget it! You can't overpower me that easily."

"Worth a try," he said with a wry smile. "But you know that if you insist on leaving, I'll continue alone. And suppose I get caught and connected with you?

"All right, you've got me there." Her own curiosity about the books fought with her indignation and won. She knelt beside the nearest box.

"Damn, there's a lot here," Nigel said. "This could take a while." She expected him to pry off the lid with a knife. Instead, he simply gripped the edge with both hands and tugged. The top peeled off like cardboard. Nigel winced at the rending sound. "Noisy, too. Let's hope there's nobody prowling the halls."

Denise goggled at him. With a frown of impatience, he scooped out the first layer of styrofoam popcorn. "Let's get to it. We don't have all night. You're looking for a small volume, quite old, in Latin. Show me any possibilities you come across."

Wrenching herself out of her momentary paralysis, she sat on the floor beside him and began pawing through the box. In spite of the dust tickling her nose, she succumbed to the lure of mildewed bindings and faded ink. She wished they did have all night to pore over this trove.

Nigel echoed her sentiments. "I do lust after that book, but I won't be allowed to use it in my research."

"Demons? What could that possibly have to do with your field?"

"I'm working on psychohistory, remember? This illustrates a turning point in cultural attitudes toward the supernatural. Tell you about it later." After delving to the bottom of the first crate, he opened a second, and later a third. Denise's back ached by now, but she'd pushed guilt to the bottom of her mind and surrendered to the pleasure of the quest. Finally Nigel emitted a suppressed cry of triumph. "Here it is! And none too soon." As she started to rise from the floor, he grabbed her arm. "Quiet. Oh, hell, someone's coming."

A few seconds later, she, too, heard footsteps in the hall. Nigel leaped up to extinguish the light, then crouched beside her again. "Stay down, out of sight, and out of my way. I won't be any rougher than minimally necessary."

In the unrelieved darkness she heard Nigel creeping toward the door. How did he keep from stumbling over boxes? From the hall a man's voice said, "Who's in there? Is everything okay?" He shoved the door open. In the light from the corridor Denise caught a glimpse of a security guard's uniform. She absorbed no other details about the man, except that, although shorter than Nigel, he was twice as broad.

The guard stepped inside, raising a flashlight. "I know somebody's in here--might as well show yourself." Just as he flicked on his light, Nigel loomed up behind him. The flash dropped from the guard's hand as Nigel's fist descended on the back of his neck. The man hit the floor with a muted groan and a thud.

Nigel wasn't even breathing hard. "He didn't get a look at us. Your reputation is safe."

She tiptoed to his side. Unlike Nigel, she felt herself on the verge of hyperventilating. "He isn't dead?" she gulped.

"I told you I wouldn't seriously hurt him," said Nigel. "For heaven's sake, calm down. We still have to get out of here with our prize."

He clasped her hand to lead her into the hall. Squinting in the light, she checked her watch. "Guess what, the library's closed."

"I wasn't planning to walk out the front door, anyway. Where are the nearest stairs?"

She guided him around several corners to a glowing Exit sign. Climbing to the first floor, they emerged in the reference section. She glanced around this

familiar territory, relieved to find no one in sight. But Nigel lifted his head like a startled deer. "Stay in contact with me and freeze," he whispered.

Startled by his urgent tone, she obeyed. Then she heard wheels on the carpet. A book cart, pushed by a young black man, appeared between the stacks. He was headed straight for their corner.

Denise held her breath, while Nigel squeezed her hand. Watching his face, she saw his eyes unfocus, as if he were falling into a trance himself. The cart rattled closer. The man--Bob, that was his name--couldn't fail to see them. Denise's mind scrambled for excuses why she'd be giving a friend a tour of the library after closing.

Bob strolled past, within arm's reach. His eyes slid right over them.

When he'd disappeared out of sight and earshot, Denise let out her breath. "He didn't see us. He looked right at us, but he didn't see us."

"Just preoccupied, no doubt."

Denise snorted at this feeble rationalization.

"Nobody else in the area," said Nigel. "Our luck's holding. Are the windows alarmed?"

"Not yet. They don't set the alarms until they all lock up and leave."

Nigel strode to the nearest window, unlatched it, and pushed it up. "Too easy. The security system could use overhauling." He moved a chair for Denise to stand on. When she mounted it and stood irresolute, her hands on the sill, he gave her a light slap on the rear. "Don't lose your nerve now."

In that position the window was at her waist level, so it was easy, albeit awkward, for her to drag herself through the opening. She scraped her forearm on the latch.

Nigel followed, closing the window behind them. "Clumsy," he said amiably. "You've hurt yourself." He took her hand and examined the laceration, which was beading blood. "Get that cleaned up as soon as you can. Don't want infection."

"I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself," she said, "when not being dragged around on illegal expeditions by nutty friends." She found they were standing on the roof of a jutting portion of the ground level set into a hillside. Kneeling next to the low concrete wall, she saw that the drop to the pavement was at least twice her height. She turned to face Nigel. In the dark his eyes glowed crimson at the centers.

Hallucination, she insisted to herself. Or a trick of the light. No. Flash bulbs can make human eyes shine red; ordinary light can't. So it's hallucination.

Abruptly Nigel pulled her close, nuzzled her scratched arm, and kissed her hard on the lips. After a second of shock, she melted in response. In contrast to his cool hands, his lips burned.

He released her just as suddenly. "Sorry. Couldn't resist. It won't happen again."

Why not? she inwardly raged.

Before she could gather her wits, he wrapped his arms around her. Her head spun as he lifted her and leaped off the roof as casually as if jumping into a swimming pool. She closed her eyes. Instead of a jarring drop, she felt as if they were floating through the air. Maybe I'm coming catching some kind of virus. Or he did hypnotize me, after all. She ventured a peek. Nigel landed, catlike, without a jolt. They were standing in the parking lot. When he set her down, she again noticed that red gleam in his eyes. *No, I don't,* she insisted.

He looked around and cocked his head as if listening. "The coast is clear, Watson."

"I don't see you as Holmes," she sniffed. "I think you're actually having fun."

"Most I've had all year," he said. He took her arm and walked her to the car. "How's your Latin?"

"Rusty. I don't have much call to use it in real life."

"What's the world coming to?" he sighed with a head-shake of mock despair. "All right, you drive, and I'll read to you." He held up the book. In the parking lot floodlight she noticed that it was a leather-bound octavo volume with brass guards at each corner of the cover.

Denise didn't breathe deeply until they were well away from the library, safely moving in the direction of home. Nigel gave her a sly smile. "Glad it's over? According to the Marquis de Sade, it's only the first crime that's difficult. Before you know it, you'll be a hardened malefactor."

"Oh, shut up, Nigel. Unless you're going to tell me about the book, the way you promised."

"Right." He opened it, turning pages one by one with a scholar's care. "This Father Hillyard was the village priest in a little place called Corville, north of London. There was an outbreak of assaults in the area, attributed to some sort of demonic creature. Hillyard investigated, and interviewed some of the victims. Unfortunately, the situation was never resolved. The locals marched on the castle where the 'demon' supposedly laired, but there was no flaming Hollywood climax. The creature had disappeared. Hillyard linked this episode with a local legend, similar attacks on young women that had taken place around the year eleven hundred. But the bishop censured him because of the unorthodox conclusions he reached. That's why there are so few copies left. Listen to this."

He read slowly, translating. "'I believe that the *monstrum*'--either 'portent' or 'monster' in the modern sense--'said to have inhabited the abandoned castle of the Corvilles is the same being that dwelt there four centuries ago. If so, this long life argues that he is indeed a fiend from the Abyss. Yet I believe otherwise. I conversed at length with the only maiden to be taken to the castle and imprisoned there for a long period, and then to escape. Having passed some seven weeks in his company, she holds that the Demon is no hellish spirit, but a creature of flesh, bound by the laws of his nature, though it be different from ours.'"

"Sounds more like science fiction than demonology," said Denise.

"Father Hillyard, poor fellow, had a surprisingly modern outlook." Nigel read on, "'In the ensuing pages I shall demonstrate by many and weighty proofs my reasons for upholding this belief. To wit: Though the Demon did indeed, by the maiden's testimony, drink her blood from minute cuts on her neck or arm, he also fed upon the blood of deer and other game, and also upon milk brought to him by his agents, certain lawless men in his hire. She never observed him to change shape as devilish spirits are said to do, save that for the purpose of flight, he was wont to sprout a pair of great wings. He passed through doors by opening them, in the manner of a mortal. Though his strength was prodigious, it was no greater than that of wild creatures such as wolves and bears. He hungered, grew weary, and could be hurt, like a mortal. Nor did the Demon catch fire and crumble to ash in the rays of the sun, as has been idly rumored. She saw him abroad by daylight more than once, though he confessed that he avoided the sun because it distressed him.'"

Denise pulled the car up behind the Corvette in front of her house and stared at Nigel. The look he gave her before continuing showed that he realized the wild notion burgeoning in her brain. "'For these and many other reasons, I hold that the so-called Demon who scourged this region both four centuries ago and these past few years was no fiend, but a creature of another race, with the outward form of man, yet with certain differences from human nature. I believe that he ought to be classed with the *longaevi*'--" He broke off and said to Denise, "You know that word, of course? the long-lived ones '--like the fauns, nymphs, and satyrs of the ancient world, or with the folk of the Antipodes told of in travelers' tales, neither human nor beast, yet creatures of this earth, spawned in neither Heaven nor Hell. Moreover, if this one exists, surely others of his kind must dwell somewhere, for they must breed, however infrequently.'" He closed the book and laid it between their seats.

"Your family wants this suppressed?" said Denise. "What's the point? Nobody would believe it except the lunatic fringe."

Nigel nodded. "Some of those would, certainly--the type of people who read Fort and Von Daniken with relish, the type who hanker to believe in gods from outer space, strange creatures living secretly among humankind, and all sorts of monstrous conspiracies. But there's another category that would accept Father Hillyard's theory as fact. The few people who've met such creatures and suffered

at their hands--or think they have. These people are isolated now." He smiled wryly at the way Denise half-consciously drew back against the driver's door. "Those who believe in these creatures and want revenge for real or imagined injuries would jump at any scrap of published proof, however farfetched. They'd welcome the chance to get together with others who share their obsession. They might even manage to convince a measurable percentage of the public that they aren't so nutty, after all."

For a minute they silently stared at each other in the moonlight. Nigel remained motionless, a faint smile on his lips, like a man trying to tame a wary animal. His breathing was labored, from excitement, she sensed, not exertion. Again she glimpsed a red gleam in his eyes. This time she didn't try to fool herself that she imagined it. She recalled how he'd hypnotized the librarian, made the two of them virtually invisible, and made that incredible leap from the roof with her in his arms. Finally she burst out, "Nigel--what are you?"

He took a deep breath before speaking. "What would you call a creature that lives for thousands of years, avoids sunlight, sometimes lapses into suspended animation during the day, can be killed only with great difficulty, has superhuman strength, speed, and endurance, as well as certain powers ordinarily called 'psychic,' and subsists mainly on blood?"

"If this is a riddle, what's the punch line?" she said.

"There's an easy one-word answer. But it's misleading."

"Vampire, I suppose."

"Close enough," he said. "But not a walking corpse or spawn of the Devil. Just another species, a minority passing for human, not daring to let their true nature be known."

Her fear was swamped by the indignation she still hadn't worked through. "Damn you, why did you have to make me your accomplice? You could have handled this whole thing just fine by yourself. You and your superhuman powers!"

"But having you along made it so much easier. Believe it or not, I really wanted to avoid violence." He rubbed his eyes. "Look, could we fight in the house? This is a damned uncomfortable car you've got."

He stepped out of the car. The moment he shut the passenger door, Denise pushed the automatic lock button, revved the engine, and backed up in a shower of gravel. She spun around and roared up to the main road. She fleetingly wondered what she would do if Nigel grabbed her door handle or jumped in front of the car. He made no move to stop her, though. Luckily, no traffic was nearby when she reached the corner; she could make a right turn without pausing.

She'd driven almost fifteen minutes, with no sign of Nigel's Corvette pursuing, when she started to calm down. Easing back on the accelerator, she scanned the roadside until she noticed a picnic area. She pulled into the turn-off and sat there, trembling, for another five minutes.

How she wished she could think Nigel was out of his mind. But that would make her crazy, too, because she'd seen him do those peculiar things. And the revelation fit so well with the oddities she'd observed in him over the years. His mainly nocturnal schedule, his avoidance of the sun, the way she'd never seen him eat solid food--he gave "allergies" and "poor health" as excuses, yet he was the most vibrant, energetic person she'd ever met. After dark he was, anyway.

Why did he let me notice, tonight? He could have made sure I didn't.

She switched on the interior dome light and picked up the leather-bound book. Her Latin was as "rusty" as she'd told Nigel. Skimming the first few pages, she distinguished enough words to confirm that he'd translated accurately. She leafed through the rest of the volume. The word *"incensa"*--burned--caught her eye. Frowning at the faded print, she read from the top of the page. The passage seemed to tell the "local legend" of a woman who'd spent months as the Demon's captive around the year 1100. This girl, Isobel, had somehow escaped and returned home. Instead of staying with her family, though, she had rejoined the Demon of her own free will. This choice brought her the reputation of heresy, Satan-worship, and witchcraft. When a plague of some kind struck the town, she and her "Demon Lord" were blamed. Villagers, led by the priest, had invaded the castle by day and captured Isobel. They had burned her to death. The Demon had wreaked a

bloody vengeance on the murderers, then vanished until four centuries later.

Denise noticed her hands were shaking again as she put the book aside. Am I supposed to believe this fairy tale? No, more like a horror story.

Nigel seemed to believe that the tale held some truth. He apparently trusted her to understand, or at least suspend judgment.

He's never hurt me. He could have forced me to help him, but he left me a choice.

And he hadn't chased her down, as he easily could have. Her compact would've been no match for his Corvette. She decided she owed him a hearing, if nothing else. She pulled onto the highway and headed for home.

Nigel waited on her porch, leaning on the rail with his arms folded. He watched while she walked up to the front door and made awkward stabs at the lock with her key. The cloud of mosquitoes around the bare light bulb had thickened. Denise noticed none of them paid any attention to Nigel. He kept silent until she got the door open. As they entered the living room, he said, "Decided I'm not going to eat you alive?"

She slammed and bolted the door. "You could've hypnotized me into forgetting the whole thing. Why didn't you? It would have been so much easier!"

"I considered it." He stood in the middle of the rug, watching her.

She spun around to face him. "You did hypnotize me, didn't you? At the beginning--to make me go along with your scheme!"

"I gave you a slight nudge, that's all. I couldn't bring myself to do anything more drastic. I've never liked deceiving you. Maybe I half-consciously wanted you to notice my--differences--wanted you to discover the truth."

"Spoken like a true psychologist," she sniffed.

"Confound it, I do care about you! I've always thought of you as a friend, and I don't want that to change."

She flung her purse and keys on the couch. "And how do you think of the rest of the human race? Domestic animals?"

"For the most part," he said. "Should I lie? If I'm going to start telling you the truth, I don't want to settle for half measures." He perched on one arm of the couch.

She took a seat at the other end. Her anger was yielding to curiosity. "Nigel, how old are you?"

He laughed softly. "Don't jump to any grandiose conclusions. I'm in my early thirties, not much older than I look." He scanned her disheveled form. "You're still upset about being pressured into violating your conscience."

"What did you think, I'd get over it? But I guess human standards don't mean anything to you."

"Of course they do," he said patiently. "I've been exposed to them most of my life. And I do have my own ethics, though they might strike you as a bit skewed."

"Like how to treat friends?"

"Among other things. You see, we know only one way to express affection. I couldn't be intimate with you without--tasting you, and I couldn't tell you about myself without some compelling reason. So to avoid a situation where I'd have to deceive you, I kept you at a distance."

"I think I see." Her head buzzed with confusion. ***He left me alone because he cared about me. Isn't that one of the Ten Standard Lines?***

"Look, would it make you feel better if I sent an anonymous donation to the college, enough to cover the artifact's value?"

"Maybe. I don't know."

"It's the principle, isn't it?" he said. "Very well. If you're positive you want the book returned, I'll do it tomorrow night, at whatever risk."

Was he making a sincere offer or manipulating her again? "What would your guardian think about that?"

"He wouldn't quite flay me alive," said Nigel with a sardonic smile. "It would just feel as if he had. But consider carefully: Do you really want this material published? Do you want the world to know about us? I'm not saying that outcome is certain, but it's more than possible. Back in 1100, there was a girl, Isobel--"

"I read that part. It's--true?"

"Yes. She wasn't even one of us, just condemned by association. And we can be killed. Decapitation--dismemberment--cremation--total destruction of the brain--it's difficult, but not impossible." Sensing her revulsion, he continued more gently. "I'm not trying to terrify you. Not much, anyhow. But don't fool yourself that it couldn't happen today. The only difference would be in greater efficiency. Vampires have been killed as such in twentieth-century America. I am not overdramatizing."

Denise suppressed a shiver. "All right. Do what you have to." She felt as if the words were choking her.

He squeezed her hand. "I knew I could trust you."

Had she decided correctly? She was still an accessory to theft. On the other hand, Nigel had taken a serious risk in telling her the truth. How could she betray him? The act was done, and she resolved to stop agonizing over it. "Just don't forget that anonymous donation."

Nigel leaned back wearily on the couch. "It's getting late. Much as I dislike the idea, I've got to leave."

"You aren't going to drive back to Charlottesville tonight, are you?"

"Hardly. I'll get a motel room for the day."

She felt her heart racing and had to force the next sentence past her constricted throat. "You could stay here. This couch is a hide-a-bed."

His eyes widened in surprise. "You're still a little afraid of me. I feel it."

She swallowed a momentary queasiness. "I'd be an idiot not to have some fear of the unknown. But I trust you."

"You shouldn't," said Nigel crisply. "That comes from ignorance. In my present condition I don't dare stay near you."

"You mean--?"

"I'm hungry," he said with a quiet emphasis more convincing than histrionics. "I have to feed before daybreak. Earlier in the evening I didn't manage to score--as my cruder contemporaries would say--and I had to give up in order to leave myself enough time to drive here. The stress I've been under since then has put an edge on my appetite." He forced a smile. "You can't imagine how close you came to getting ravished on the library roof."

She sensed that his deliberate bluntness was meant to put her off. Yet with each passing second her qualms diminished. This was just Nigel, after all, whatever his peculiarities. "How much do you take?"

"Difficult to estimate. Normally about four ounces."

"But that's nothing," she said, almost disappointed. *And here I was, gearing up for some terrific sacrifice.*

"Our basic nutritional needs are supplied by animal blood and milk," he explained. "Think of human blood, for us, like trace elements in your own diet. Small in quantity but essential to life. That's misleading, too, though, because the need is more psychic than physical. Human blood is more than food and drink. It's a substitute for sex, and something very much like a drug. An addictive craving that strikes with the onset of puberty and recurs every few days for the rest of our lives."

She edged closer to him. "Does it hurt? The victim, I mean."

"Please--donor. It isn't supposed to."

"That's not a very responsive answer."

He smiled at her persistence. "It hurts only if the vampire is a sadist or an insensitive clod."

"I know that doesn't describe you." She reached up to smooth the hair curling over his forehead. "I'm healthy--want to see my Red Cross blood bank card? And I haven't been eating pizza. Or is the garlic business a myth?"

"Oh, that part is true enough. But it's not a screaming terror, just a very severe allergy. And I don't need proof of your health; it's obvious."

"What about it, then? You don't need to suffer when I'm right here."

He sat rigid as if fighting not to touch her. "Denise, what you're offering would not be wise."

She pulled back. If he expected her to do all the seducing, he could forget it. "All right, if you don't want--"

He grabbed her wrists painfully hard. "For God's sake, don't tease! I can't handle it."

"I'm not--" she gasped.

He stood up and jerked her to her feet. "You really mean it, don't you? What the hell, I may be out of my mind, but I accept." His arms encircled her, and his mouth descended upon hers. After the first few seconds the harshness of the kiss faded into lingering sensuality. Again she felt the searing heat of his lips. The room blurred to silken darkness around her. He released her only on the verge of fainting.

He let go and stepped back so abruptly that she almost fell. "Tone that down a bit, will you," he said huskily. "Take a couple of slow, deep breaths. That's right--that way you automatically decelerate your heartbeat, too. Better." He lightly clasped her upper arms. Shivering despite the muggy air, she noticed for the first time that the palms of his hands bristled against her skin.

"You do have hairs in the centers of your palms," she said.

"Cilia, technically," Nigel said. "Something like a cat's whiskers." He gently hugged her to his chest. "I've fantasized about this for years. Damned if I'll be provoked into wasting it on three minutes in the middle of your living room."

"Then you do want to take me to bed?" she said in delighted wonder.

"The bed is optional. Saves me the bother of picking you up when you collapse."

Glimpsing the amused quirk of his lips, in retaliation she slipped her fingers inside his collar and dug her nails in. His arms tightened again, and his breathing roughened. "Stop that! I will not be rushed. It would be like going to the King's Arms and ordering the diet plate."

Denise laughed at the image of a velvet-coated servitor at the restored Colonial tavern ceremoniously presenting a dollop of cottage cheese on a lettuce leaf. But then Nigel kissed her again, setting her head awhirl.

He gazed down into her eyes. "My dear girl, the reason I hesitated was because I can't offer you the exclusive commitment we'll both want."

She stiffened. "Did I ask for one?"

He kissed her forehead. "Sorry, I put that badly. Not a social commitment, an involuntary one. If I drink from you often enough--and it doesn't take much--I'll be fixated on you. It's a trap perilously easy to fall into, as if nature intended us for an exclusive bond with one donor. And you'll be addicted, too--it works both ways. The catch is, it couldn't be exclusive, because our academic obligations will keep us apart. A double bind I could do without. I can't stay away from you, though." The sigh that ruffled her hair seemed to convey more pleasure than frustration over being caught in that "bind."

"Then you're not talking one-night stand? You will visit me again?"

"Regularly. As often as I can."

She snuggled to his chest. "Then that's what I want. Even if I do have to deal with this 'addiction.' We'll work it out."

"Then that's enough. It's a beginning." He picked her up and carried her to the bedroom.

- The End -

[Nigel and Denise will return in GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS 2.]

[Margaret L. Carter is editor of Curse of the Undead (Fawcett, 1970), an anthology of vampire stories, and Dracula: The Vampire and the Critics (UMI Research Press, 1988), the only existing collection of scholarship on Stoker's Dracula. She is author of Shadow of a Shade: A Survey of Vampirism in Literature (Gordon Press, 1975) and The Vampire in Literature: A Critical Bibliography (UMI Research Press, 1989). Her vampire stories include Payer of Tribute (1989), a chapbook by Baker Street Publications, and "A Call in the Blood," in Voices from the Vaults (Key Porter Books, 1987), edited by D.P. Varma. A vampire story, "The Pale Hill's Side," is scheduled for Midnight Zoo sometime in 1992. An essay, "The Truth About Vampires: Nocturnal Predators Need Love, Too," will appear in The Compleat Vampire's Companion (Prentice-Hall), edited by Rosemary Guiley. Sealed in Blood, starring Nigel, is currently being circulated to publishers by Carter's agent, and Night Changeling is actively being considered by Zebra.]

[Carter also publishes The Vampire's Crypt (see the full page information sheet in the back of GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS) as well as annual bibliographic updates on vampire fiction.]



SWEET DARKNESS

by

Heidi Staneslow

Sweet darkness surrounds me.
Your arms again,
In the night.
I walk away, to
Light steps.
You
Follow, my silent shadow.
Silver glimpses of
Rising moon
Shine.
You say you need me
For life. I touch you,
You're warm
Alive...
The summer leaves whisper
Your secret, but only
We hear.
Alive, I think again as
Sweet darkness surrounds me,
Your arms in
The night.


Derrin '92

THE TRUTH ABOUT MURDOC

by

Diana Smith and Pat Dunn

"Mr. MacGyver?"

No, no, no, MacGyver moaned inwardly. Not another vacation interrupted!

"Mr. Thornton said I might find you here," the woman continued, her voice sultry and enticing. "I really must speak with you--it's most urgent."

It always is, MacGyver told himself. Resigned, he turned to the woman and his jaw dropped. He'd seen a lot of beautiful women in his time, but this woman outshone them all. A fall of black curls tumbled down her back, and exotic black eyes dominated a porcelain-perfect face. Her exquisite figure was draped in a red dress that swirled about her, caressing her with every step.

"Mr. MacGyver?"

"I'm sorry--what did you want?" he said, giving himself a little shake. Realizing he was still sitting while she stood beside him, he scrambled from his chair and offered it to her.

"Thank you," she breathed, sitting down and smiling up at him. "I have some information for you, but I am not certain how you will accept it."

"I'm not interested in any information--I'm on vacation," MacGyver said.

"Yes, I know, but Mr. Thornton seemed to think you would be interested in what I have to tell you," she said, motioning for him to take the empty chair. "But this is too public--we must talk in strict privacy. Could you perhaps take me to your hotel room? Or would you know of somewhere else where we won't be disturbed?"

Mac was about to tell her to take a hike when her hemline did just that as she crossed her shapely legs. Expensive silk stockings hugged her legs, and spiked high heels emphasized the lines of her calves.

"Mr. MacGyver?"

"Huh?"

"Are you all right? Are you ill, perhaps? I'm sorry I disturbed you," she said, uncrossing her legs in preparation for rising. "Let me give you my card, and when you are feeling better you can contact me. I shall endeavor to handle Murdoc until then."

"Murdoc?" Suddenly Mac's mind was clear of all befuddlement, all lascivious thoughts. "What about him? Did he send you--"

"No, Mr. MacGyver, he didn't. In fact, if he knew I was here, asking for your help and offering to reveal his secret--well, I should think I'd be struck down." She pulled dark glasses from her purse and slid them over her eyes.

MacGyver looked around the sidewalk cafe, wondering if Murdoc was present.

"He's not here, not now," she assured him. "He *is* on your trail, however. And he intends to kill you. I shouldn't like that, Mr. MacGyver. The world has need of you." She stood up and offered him her hand. "Call me when you're feeling up to it, and in the meantime be extremely cautious."

Mac looked at the card she handed him, then leaped up from his chair when he realized she was walking away. "Hey, wait a minute!" he called, hurrying after her and catching her by the arm. "You just can't drop Murdoc's name in my lap and then walk away! How are you involved with him?"

"I am not involved with Murdoc, of that you may be certain," she assured him, taking his arm and tucking her hand in its crook. "I am afraid the world would be a better place if Murdoc departed. As much as I loathe killing and violence, I'm afraid that's the only end for him. He has killed too many people, destroyed too many lives."

"What are you, some kind of vigilante?"

"I like to see justice being done," she said, evading a direct answer. "As do you, Mr. MacGyver. You are a modern day knight."

"I wouldn't say--"

"But I would," she interrupted. "I have a particular fondness for knights," she added with a sensuous smile. "I have become quite adept at recognizing a knight when I see one, and you have the heart of the most chivalrous of knights."

Mac was thoroughly embarrassed, and he glanced at her card in an effort to cover that embarrassment. "'Varina Thanos, Music Counselor'," he read. "What's a music counselor?"

"I evaluate a student's musical potential, what instrument is best suited to the individual, what level of skill can be expected. And then I offer instructions or make recommendations for other instructors. I teach voice, and a variety of musical instruments. I also teach the history of music and the role it has played in the development of Man. Have you recently acquired an instrument unfamiliar to you? I can probably identify it for you, repair it, instruct you in its playing. I also can identify the composer of unsigned musical scores." Her tone was not one of bragging, merely stating fact.

"All that, huh?" MacGyver said, impressed.

"You are no doubt aware of the mathematical nature of music," she said. "Mozart was fascinated by the connection between music and math."

"Mozart?" How did they get from Murdoc to Mozart? For that matter, just how did they get to his hotel room?

"You must know Mozart, Mr. MacGyver," she said with a throaty laugh. She kicked off her high heels, rubbing her toes into the carpet. "What a lovely room."

"Thanks," MacGyver said automatically, watching her. Every movement was sensuous, but it seemed to be natural for her and not contrived. "What about Murdoc?"

Dropping gracefully down on the sofa, she patted the space beside her. "No pleasantries first? A knight is always chivalrous, Mr. MacGyver," she chided, a smile illuminating her exquisite features.

"Just MacGyver," Mac corrected, slowly sitting beside her. She slid closer and placed a delicate hand on his thigh. Mac swallowed hard. He didn't make a habit of picking up--or being picked up--by beautiful women, and he certainly didn't get intimate with strangers. But this woman was blitzing his senses.

"MacGyver," she breathed, her lips inches from his ear. "Have you a first name?"

"Just MacGyver."

"As you wish--MacGyver."

He blinked, found he couldn't move his gaze away from hers as she cupped his jaw in one dainty palm. He'd never heard his name sound so sexy...

When her lips touched his ear, he jerked free of her spell. "Just one minute, lady," he said, catching her hands and holding her away from him. One slim thigh had somehow draped itself over his so that she was half on his lap. "I don't know what your plan is, but I'm not interested in any hanky-panky with a woman who bandies about the name of my nemesis."

Lush red lips pouted and disappointment shone in her black eyes. Sitting back, she folded her hands in her lap and managed to give the impression of demure innocence. "Chivalrous to a fault," she said with a sigh. "And I do not indulge in 'hanky-panky' as you put it. I am always most serious about my encounters."

It finally dawned on him that she spoke with a slight accent, but he couldn't quite place it. Her English, while flawless, leaned towards a more formal pattern.

"What about Murdoc?"



"Such single-mindedness. Very well, that is why I sought you, is it not? To warn you about his nature, why he seems indestructible. He has become what we call a 'rogue' and he threatens our peaceful existence." One well-manicured fingertip touched his lips to silence his questions. "But I know that if I tell you what he is, you will refuse to believe me. So now what do we do?"

"The truth might be a good place to start," MacGyver said. "Tell me your story and we'll see if I believe you. I still think you were sent by Murdoc."

"You can be as obstinate as another man I know," she said with a slight smile. "The truth is that I have not been sent by Murdoc, but rather have come to offer my assistance in defeating him."

"Your assistance?" Mac asked in disbelief. The woman had to be nuts if she thought she stood a chance against Murdoc.

"I am not as fragile as you think, MacGyver. But I believe you must see his end for yourself, or you will never be free of him. You will always wonder if he's waiting in the shadows."

"I do that now," Mac said with a short laugh.

"Yes, I imagine you must," she said with a nod. "I know what it is like to fear what lurks in the shadows, to wonder if this time the true death will claim you."

"The *true* death?" Mac echoed. "What the heck is that?"

"How many times have you thought Murdoc was dead, only to discover he had somehow cheated Death?" she asked, her dark eyes studying him.

Mac thought that over, then nodded. "Okay, I'll buy it--for now. So just how has he managed these miracles?"

"Do you believe in vampires?"

"Vampires?" Mac stared at her, then started laughing. "Okay, Jack, that's enough! You can come out now. Did you really think I'd fall for it? I don't know how you found out where I was staying, or why you staged this, but it's over."

"Mr. MacGyver?" Varina asked, watching in bewilderment as he began checking behind the draperies and the other rooms of his suite. "Who is this Jack?"

"Jack is the guy who hired you," Mac informed her, whipping open a closet door and looking around when all he found was his clothes.

"No one hired me, I assure you," she said, getting up from the sofa and going to him. "By your reaction I can see you don't believe in vampires. Tell me, can you think of another reason he has escaped certain death so many times?"

"Lots of reasons, lady," Mac said, backing away from her. "But vampirism is *not* one of them."

She sighed, smiled sadly and touched his cheek. "No doubt you are thinking of the cinematic creatures, or that absurdity of Stoker's imagination. I'm not talking about shape-changing monsters that hunt nightly, ripping out the throats of their victims."

"Oh, there's another kind?"

"There is my kind."

"Your--That's it, Jack," MacGyver exclaimed, turning around. "Now I know you're hiding here somewhere."

"We are quite alone, MacGyver," she said, running her hand from his cheek to his throat. Her fingertips stroked the pulse in his neck, and he swallowed hard, suddenly nervous.

"You can't be--I saw you out in the daylight. Aren't vampires supposed to explode or something when exposed to the sun?" Mac asked, remembering the horror movies he'd grown up on.

"I have met one or two who have that problem," she agreed, stretching up on her tiptoes to touch her lips to his throat and drawing away. "Go look at my shoes."

Mac stared at her, then shook his head and went over to pick up one dainty high-heeled shoe. "So?"

"Look at the soles."

Obediently he turned the shoe over, frowned at the unfashionable thickness. "Platforms are out of style," he commented.

"Unfortunately," she said with a smile. "But for me the thick soles are a necessity. As long as I line the soles of my shoes with my native soil, I can go about in daylight and even cross running water. I don't change into a bat or a wolf, and I don't kill."

"I'm relieved to hear it," Mac said, carefully putting the shoe down and thinking hard. She really believed what she was saying! "Okay," he said, turning to face her and raising his hands in a placating gesture. "You're a vampire. What does that make me--dinner?"

"If you like," she smiled, taking a step towards him.

"No, I *don't* like," Mac protested, backing up. She probably used an ice pick on her victims' throats.

"You'll find it quite pleasurable," she promised, her eyes glinting. "Unlike Murdoc, I don't feed on terror but rather love and pleasure. Terror is such a fleeting thing; that is why his kind must feed so often, and so deeply. I take no more than would fill a wine goblet, two or three times a month."

The back of Mac's knees hit the bed and he fell down on it. "Listen, lady, I don't want to hurt you..."

She straddled his lap, her hands on his shirt buttons. "And I will not hurt you. I can only think of one way to truly convince you that I speak the truth."

Mac put his hands up to break her hold only to meet an unexpected strength. His eyes widened and he struggled against her.

"No, no, MacGyver, not with fear," she said, stroking his face. There was sadness in her lustrous eyes. "Not with fear."

Mac raised himself on his elbows to watch her as she walked away to stand at the window. Her back to him, she looked out at the darkening sky and he slowly got up from the bed to walk over to her. "I'm not afraid of you, I just find your story--"

"Ridiculous," she finished for him, slim arms wrapped around herself. "Long ago the trouble was not in convincing people of the truth but rather convincing them to *not* believe. You have no idea how difficult it is to live a normal life when at every turn you find someone ready to pound a stake through your heart."

Mac scratched his head, gave a wry smile. "Well, I can imagine what it would be like," he said, touching her arm.

"But you still don't believe me. And you won't believe that I speak the truth about what Murdoc is. I could force you down, take of your blood and bend you to my will, but that is the sort of thing he would do. I am not like him." Varina kept her gaze averted from his, and somehow Mac knew that if she had met his gaze she could have compelled him. "Mr. MacGyver, please take every precaution." She turned and walked away to slip on her shoes and pick up her handbag. "I wish I could have helped you."

Mac glanced at the mirror by the door and gave a start. She had no reflection.

"Wait, Ms. Thanos," he said. She paused, but did not look at him. Mac took a deep breath. "There are ways to make trick mirrors that cast no reflections, but why one would be in my hotel room, just when you come in to visit, is beyond me. I'm not saying I believe your story, but I think we need to talk some more. Where can I find you?"

She turned her head, smiling. "You want to confirm with Mr. Thornton that I have contacted him on this matter. Very wise. Don't worry, Mr. MacGyver. When you are ready to talk, you will be able to find me."

"Yes, but where?"

"There is an art gallery where you can leave a message for me," she said, pulling another card from her purse.

"'The Phoenix's Eye'?" Mac read, eyes widening.

"Interesting coincidence, isn't it? Your company is the Phoenix Foundation," she said with a smile. "Or is it an omen, MacGyver? I hope to hear from you--soon." She kissed his cheek and was gone.

I stared at the card, wondering if maybe I was having hallucinations. She couldn't possibly be a vampire, but that would explain a few things about Murdoc... No, I wouldn't even think about that. I dialed Pete's number, tapping

the card against the telephone while I waited for him to answer.

"Okay, Pete, fill me in," I said when I heard his voice.

"She found you."

"Yeah, she found me. What gives? Why did you send her here?"

"She insisted that she had some vital information for you regarding Murdoc," Peter told me. "She refused to tell me what it was, just that it might save your life. Sorry if I interrupted your vacation, but I thought it was important."

So she hadn't told Pete her wild story.

"And she has some pretty good recommendations--she knows someone on the Board."

That was more than I knew. "The Board" was an unknown entity as far as I was concerned. In fact, if anyone did know the identities of the people behind the Phoenix Foundation I'd never met them.

"Mac? You still there?"

"Yeah, Pete."

"So what did she say about Murdoc?"

"I'm not sure yet. Just that he's out there, and looking for me."

Pete's voice was concerned. "We suspected that much, after that last crank call you got, Mac. It's been a year, and nothing's happened."

"I know. Listen, I've got an address the woman gave me--I think I'll pay a visit to it."

"Be careful, Mac."

"I was planning on it," I said. "Talk to you later, Pete." I hung up the phone and stared out the window at the beachfront, then went to get ready.

A bell chimed over MacGyver's head as he opened the door to the Phoenix's Eye Gallery.

He glanced around at the small art gallery. Thick beige carpet gave under his feet as he advanced, looking at the sculptures and paintings. The gallery was nearly empty; only a few well-dressed patrons were examining the framed abstracts on the far wall.

Mac approached a receptionist's desk. "Excuse me, Miss, but is Varina Thanos here now?"

"Thanos? Let me check," she said, smiling at him and reaching for the phone on her desk. "May I say who's calling?"

"She'll know."

Her smile faltered a moment, but she maintained her pleasant facade and said, "I'll see if Mr. Tannek is in."

"Mr. Tannek? I'm here for Varina Thanos," Mac corrected, wondering if 'Nicholas Tannek' was really Murdoc.

"If she's not in, Mr. Tannek will know where she is and when she'll be back," the receptionist said, smiling brightly.

"Never mind," Mac said, placing his hand over hers. "You just tell 'Mr. Tannek' I'm not that stupid--"

"I should hope not, Mr. MacGyver," said a deep, commanding voice. "My information led me to believe you are a highly intelligent man."

MacGyver turned around slowly, hands held out in front of him. Murdoc was a master of disguise, but even he couldn't have carried off such an impersonation. The man stood about six-foot-four and the rippling muscles couldn't have been faked. Dark eyes seemed to pierce Mac's very soul, reading every secret. There was no trace of madness in the knowing eyes, no sign of Murdoc's insane obsession. "Nicholas Tannek?" Mac asked cautiously.

The man inclined his dark head in acknowledgment. "Come, Mr. MacGyver, my private office is this way," he said, motioning with one hand for MacGyver to accompany him. "Ms. Thanos awaits."

"I'll bet she does," Mac muttered under his breath.

Tannek merely smiled at that and led the way. Once in his office, he indicated a seat near his desk, while he sat behind the polished oak desk. "Have you decided to believe Ms. Thanos?"

Mac eyed the man with evident suspicion, wondering who he was to know so much



about it. "I believe that she has information for me regarding--someone," he said finally, "and I'm willing to listen."

"Admirable, Mr. MacGyver," Tannek said, "although you will also need to act upon this information. But the point of my question is this: do you believe what Ms. Thanos told you about herself?"

"Do you?" Mac countered.

"Oh, yes."

Mac waited for the man to continue and when he did not, simply said, "I don't know. *She* believes it but that's not the same thing, is it?"

"No, it isn't," Tannek agreed, leaning forward.

"You really believe she's a--one of those?"

"Without a doubt."

Mac abruptly stood up. "Listen, Mr. Tannek, you shouldn't encourage her. You should get her some professional help instead."

"Why do you find it so hard to believe? Just because you've never met one? You may have, you know. We don't make a habit of announcing our--condition."

"*Our* condition?" Mac repeated, eyes widening at the implication.

"Quite so, Mr. MacGyver," Tannek assured him, looking mildly amused.

I have never believed in vampires. Yet in the space of twenty-four hours I'd had two people tell me they ***are*** *vampires--as well as hint that Murdoc was one too. It went a little bit beyond coincidence.*

"So now you want me to believe you are a vampire, too," Mac said, backing slowly towards the door. "You've gone too far, Jack. I might have fallen for it with one vampire, but not two."

"Jack? My name is Nicholas, not Jack."

Mac gave the taller man a slight grin. "Yeah, right. But you were hired--or bamboozled--by Jack Dalton to play a little gag on his old buddy MacGyver. Nice try, pal, but I'll just go back to my lazing by the pool."

"Then you have discounted all that Varina told you."

Mac paused, staring at the man.

"And you have chosen to ignore the fact that she had no reflection," Nicholas continued, shaking his head. "I was led to believe that you are an exceptionally intelligent man, Mr. MacGyver. A man with an open mind, willing to listen before forming opinions. Else I would not have allowed Varina to approach you. Mr. Murdoc is extremely dangerous, not only to you and your kind, but I fear that he is beyond redemption. Varina felt you needed to be a part of his extermination, to know for certain that he is no longer a threat to you and yours."

"The mirror could have been rigged," MacGyver said after a long pause.

"Is that what you believe, then?"

"No," Mac answered honestly. He sighed, shrugged. "I'll be frank with you, Mr. Tannek. I don't believe in vampires. But then, I didn't believe in ghosts, or zombies-or miracles, either, for that matter. Not at first, anyway."

"Yet you do, now?" Nicholas asked, his penetrating gaze fixed on MacGyver.

"Maybe. I'm willing to listen--but I need something more substantial than vague hints that Murdoc's returned from the dead like some sort of copycat Dracula." Folding his arms across his chest, he challenged, "Convince me, Mr. Tannek."

"I believe you will have to convince yourself, Mr. MacGyver," Nicholas said after a moment. "If you have nothing but nonsensical images to compare us to, you will not believe anything I say. I regret ever allowing Mr. Stoker to publish his fantasy. Had I known how popular it would become, or that the world would use it as a yardstick for all vampires..."

Mac stared at the man's mouth, and Nicholas obliged his curiosity by grinning widely and exposing his teeth. Realizing he'd been caught, Mac glanced hurriedly away.

"Admit to a certain curiosity, Mr. MacGyver. We are willing to indulge you, allow you to question and test, to observe us to your heart's content. Varina trusts in you, believes you will not betray us."

Mac was confused, and he sank down in the chair he'd recently abandoned.

Maybe he was right; maybe I should stick around and observe the pair of them.

Not that I believed they were "Creatures of the Night", of course, but it would be one way to find out just what they were really up to and how they were involved with Murdoc.

"Nicholas? Have you convinced Mr. MacGyver that we are being truthful with him?"

Mac's head swung around to the door. If possible, she was more beautiful than he remembered. How could this delicate and elegant woman be what she claimed?

"I believe he has agreed to withhold forming an opinion until he has more data," Nicholas said with a smile, standing and offering her his hand.

Placing her hand in his, she approached Mac who hurriedly scrambled to his feet. "I suppose I would be disappointed if you had accepted us so easily," she said to Mac, her smile sweetly sad.

Mac cleared his throat and inquired, "So, Ms. Thanos, did you know Bram Stoker personally, too?"

An explosion from the front of the gallery prevented her from replying. Mac whirled toward the door and ran out, Nicholas and Varina close behind him.

They were greeted by a sheet of flames.

"It's a fire-bomb," MacGyver shouted. "Tannek, where's your extinguisher?"

The sprinkler system kicked on, but a section of the room was engulfed with no sign of the sprinklers. Nicholas grabbed a fire extinguisher and Mac took it from him, aiming the spray at the heart of the flames.

"Gayle!" Varina cried, dropping to her knees and crawling to the inert body of the receptionist.

"Varina!" Nicholas caught her by the leg, pulled her back.

"But Gayle--"

"I shall see to her. Get back in the office," he ordered.

"We've got to hurry!" Mac warned, coughing and eyes streaming. "This is getting out of control!"

"Take Varina into my office--try the window!" Nicholas helped the woman to her feet and handed her over to MacGyver, then turned toward the secretary's desk.

"Don't be heroic!" Mac shouted, as Nicholas hesitated before the flames. "There's nothing you can do!"

"Give me the extinguisher," Nicholas responded.

Mac shook his head, but handed it over, then clasped Varina's hand and pulled her into the office.

Coughing, MacGyver picked up the swivel chair and smashed out the window. He wrapped his jacket around his right fist and forearm, and swept out the remaining shards of glass. "Come on," he called to Varina. "We can get out through here!"

"You must go," she said, her hands on the door that led back to the main showroom. "I will not leave without Nicholas."

"He'll be along," Mac began, taking her arm and trying to tug her toward the window. He was astounded by the unexpected strength the woman possessed.

She pushed him away, determined to aid Nicholas and the secretary. Mac glanced at the window, then followed her as she returned to the smoke-filled room where Tannek was fighting a losing battle against the flames.

Nicholas glanced over his shoulder, and Mac noticed he didn't seem particularly surprised to see that Varina had returned.

"Drag Gayle to safety," he said curtly. "This extinguisher is nearly empty, but I shall endeavor to cover you."

Varina was already on her knees, crawling to the downed woman. Mac quickly followed, wincing when he saw the once-attractive face was now a lump of burned flesh.

"Gayle, can you hear me?" Varina said, gently touching the burned shoulder. It appeared she'd taken the full brunt of the explosion.

"Let me help," MacGyver said to Varina, though he doubted they had reached the injured woman in time. He carefully slid his arms under the receptionist and picked her up, staggering back through the smoke toward the office.

Nicholas and Varina accompanied him, and Nicholas closed the door, blocking some of the heat and smoke.

With Nicholas' assistance, MacGyver carried the semi-conscious woman through the shattered window and carefully laid her down on the ground a safe distance from the gallery. Nicholas helped Varina out, then followed her to where Mac knelt beside the receptionist.

He glanced up as they reached her side. "She'll need an ambulance--these burns are--" Mac broke off as the victim opened her eyes and said:

"He promised--live forever--immortal... Sorry..." Her voice faded weakly.

Nicholas frowned and looked at Varina, who was staring at Gayle in horror.

MacGyver felt her pulse, then raised his eyes. "She's dead. I'm sorry."

"Not as sorry as Murdoc shall be," Nicholas vowed, taking Varina into a comforting embrace. "This was a warning, my heart," he said to the top of her head. "He has declared open warfare on us."

"You think Murdoc was responsible for this?" Mac asked, covering the dead woman with his jacket.

"I have no doubt," Nicholas assured him. "During our last conversation, he made it quite clear that he would not tolerate our interference with his plans for you. Naturally, we could not allow him to carry out those plans."

"Naturally," Mac said dryly.

I was inclined to believe they were on my side, but it was all too pat. Maybe I was supposed to trust them, let them lure me into one of Murdoc's traps. The best way to find out what they were up to was to stick with them. At least I could be on my guard.

"She said he promised her immortality," Varina said, looking up at Nicholas. "How could we not have known he was using her?"

"You must not blame yourself, my heart," he told her, as the air filled with the sirens of emergency vehicles. "I should have seen it, myself."

Mac stood up and rubbed the palms of his hands together absently, a furrow creasing his forehead. "The fire truck's here," he said. "I'll go see if there's anything I can do to help."

Varina reached out and grabbed MacGyver's hand. "Thank you, Mr. MacGyver."

He glanced down and was lost in her gaze for an endless moment. "Oh, you're welcome." He went toward the street.

"You were right about him, Varina," said Nicholas softly, watching him go.

"But of course," she said, smiling at him. "I *am* quite the expert when it comes to recognizing knights, beloved. After all, I have you for the model." She looked down at the lifeless body of the receptionist. "Do you suppose he took from her enough times? Will she awaken to our life?"

"I don't believe so," Nicholas said, going to kneel beside the young woman. "There is no sign of tissue regeneration, which would have begun at the moment of death."

"He is heartless," Varina said, her eyes blazing like ebony fire. "It is his kind that has given those of our blood the nasty reputation of evil."

Paramedics came bearing a stretcher and Nicholas stood up, allowing them access to the victim of Murdoc's fire-bomb. An arm around Varina, he watched as the medics checked for signs of life.

Sooty and smelling of smoke, MacGyver came up to join them, watching as the medics produced a body bag.

"Mr. Tannek?"

The trio turned to the fire chief.

"This was the work of an arsonist," the chief informed them, tipping his hat back and wiping the sweat from his forehead. "We found pieces of an apparent bomb."

"Oh Nicholas, you don't suppose it was that group of protesters, do you? You remember, the ones who swore they'd never allow you to show the work of that artist--what was his name? The one they claimed did pornography, not art?"

MacGyver blinked at that and looked curiously at Nicholas, awaiting his response.

"Ah... Yes," said Nicholas, rubbing his forehead. "I don't remember the details right now, Chief, but I can get them for you--it may take a little while..."

"You're saying that you've received threats before?"

"Well, there have been picket groups outside for the last week prior to Mr. Byrne's opening," Nicholas commented.

"Yeah, I think I saw something about that on the news," Mac put in helpfully.

The fire chief sighed. "All right. File a report and we'll see what we can do."

"Quick thinking," Mac murmured once the fire chief had walked away.

"Varina has always been very good at improvisation," Nicholas said, tucking Varina to his side and walking away from the scene of the fire. Mac hesitated, then followed.

The hairs on the back of his neck began to tingle, and Mac glanced around in time to see light glinting off the metal tip of a crossbow bolt. "Down!" he shouted, shoving the pair in front of him to the ground.

Mac flung himself down on the pavement, wincing as his left knee contacted painfully with the curbing. He heard the crossbow bolt whir overhead and the clatter as it struck the pavement.

Nicholas lifted his head, dark eyes sweeping their surroundings. "Varina, stay here," he commanded, getting to his feet. He began to run in the direction the bolt had come from.

Varina knelt beside MacGyver, who had sat up and was rubbing his swelling knee. "Mr. MacGyver, are you all right?!"

"Yeah, sure," he said, not very convincingly. "Where did Tannek go?"

"After the bowman," she answered. "I heard him running away in that direction." She pointed after Nicholas.

Mac hadn't heard anything at all, and he raised an eyebrow at this news. "I didn't see anyone, just the bolt. "You're all right, Ms. Thanos?"

"Varina, please. And yes, I am quite all right," she said, watching as he tested his knee and winced in pain. "You *are* hurt. Can you stand? Our car isn't far from here. Lean on me, Mr. MacGyver. Don't worry, I'm stronger than I look."

Mac *had* noticed, but he refrained from commenting about it. "Thanks," he said, making the effort to rise to his feet with Varina's assistance. "Just call me MacGyver--'Mister MacGyver' was my dad."

The use of past tense did not escape her. "I'm sorry," she said softly, bracing Mac with a very strong arm about his waist. "Don't push yourself; we can take our time. Nicholas will handle Murdoc."

"You're so certain it was Murdoc," Mac said, cautiously putting his weight on his injured leg.

"Aren't you?"

Taking a tentative step and clutching at the dainty woman when the pain shot through his leg, Mac stumbled and was caught by Varina. "You must work out," he murmured, impressed by her strength.

"That's not the half of it, I'm afraid," she said, guiding him towards a parked car. Mac noticed it was a luxury model, but it was an energy-efficient, smaller sedan. "There is much you should know about our kind, if you are to fight Murdoc. He is not the man you think he is."

Mac settled into the front passenger seat after Varina unlocked the door for him. He stretched his left leg out and massaged the knee as Varina closed the door and went around to the driver's side.

"The man I know is an assassin," MacGyver said thoughtfully as Varina got into the car behind the steering wheel. "Arrogant, devious, brilliant, and totally uncaring about others... Except for one person, his sister. He risked his life for her." He looked at Varina, meeting her dark eyes. "I despise him and the things he does. But I can't help respecting him, too."

"It is good to respect your enemies, but you can't allow the respect to get in the way," she said, turning her attention to driving. "All that you thought he was, he is and more. His physical strength is doubled, perhaps tripled, of what it was when he was mortal. His hearing is far superior to that of Humans, and darkness has little effect on his vision. Add to that the increase in brain capacity and you have an indomitable nemesis. He has embraced the beliefs and mores of what you might call the 'traditional vampires', the kind immortalized by

Stoker and his ilk. Oh yes, there are indeed evil vampires, just as there are evil men. And where Man is his own worst enemy, so it is with vampires. And when a vampire decides to destroy a mortal, that mortal needs help."

"So I'm this mortal who needs help. *Your* help?" Mac asked, wondering where she was taking him."

"Just as we need your help," she said, pulling into a convenience store parking lot. "No one knows Murdoc better than you. You sit here and rest--I shall be right back."

Mac watched, open-mouthed, as she hurried into the store. What on earth could a vampire want at a 7-11?

She returned with a super-large cup and a small bag. Mac watched as she dumped the cupful of ice into the plastic bag, twisted it and then placed it on his knee. "Here," she said, handing him a carton of juice. "I believe that will help restore your energy. I also have an elastic bandage for your knee, and some quick energy bars. The clerk recommended them, so I will apologize now if they aren't to your taste."

"No, they're fine, thanks," MacGyver said, a little overwhelmed by the attention she was lavishing on him. "Okay--so Murdoc's after me. *That's* nothing new. I don't know if I'm ready to believe he's a vampire, but I will admit he's out there."

"Well, that's a beginning," she said, switching on the ignition. "Keep that ice pack on your knee, please," she added when he lifted the make-shift ice pack. "I don't have Nicholas' medical skill, but he *has* taught me a few things over the centuries."

"Centuries?" Mac echoed, giving his head a shake. Something in her manner was so convincing.

"Shall I tell you something of our background? Would that help you come to terms with our claim? We met in what your historians now call the time of the Black Death. Nicholas already had about four centuries behind him, four very lonely centuries. I had been taken from my home in Crete and sold into slavery in England. To me, those five years were as long as his four hundred. My masters were cruel, sadistic rapists--products of their time, I suppose. At the height of the Plague, unreasonable panic reigned and foreigners became suspect of carrying the Plague. There is no doubt that it was spread by travelers, but it was so widespread across Europe that it was hard to determine where it began. I was imprisoned, and would have been burned to death if not for Nicholas."

"He rescued you--"

"Oh yes," she agreed, flashing a smile at him. "He was also imprisoned, fortunately in my cell. His man of business bought his way out, and he in turn bought mine. I have been with him ever since."

"The Black Death was in the 14th century, wasn't it?" Mac asked, mentally calculating. "That's nearly 650 years."

"It was in 1347, to be exact," she informed him. "I shall never forget that day--he has been my knight ever since, although at the time he was beginning his medical studies and putting his warrior days behind him."

There was no doubting that Tannek had the build or strength for a 'warrior', but her story was a bit fantastic. There was something in her manner, though, that made me wonder if she was *telling the truth. She was so matter-of-fact about the whole thing.*

"Medical studies--he's a doctor?"

"Oh yes, although he doesn't practice formally--it's too difficult nowadays what with all the requirements for proof of education. It's becoming awkward to say the least, what with having to procure identification papers and proof of birth, that sort of thing. Nicholas has attended medical schools during this century, and he keeps abreast with medical journals, but people are so conscious of appearances that they notice one's lack of aging. It was so much easier in the old days," she said with a sigh.

"Yeah, I can see that," Mac murmured. He looked out of the car window as she pulled into an underground parking garage and slipped the car into a space. "Where are we going?"

"To our apartment," Varina told him. "The elevators are that way."

"Fine," Mac said, figuring he couldn't be surprised by much more today. He got out of the car and limped after the woman as she led the way to the apartment building's elevators.

Okay, so maybe I could be surprised. We took a private elevator up to the penthouse. The man who met us at the door could have played the butler on The Addams Family--at least in size. There were nearly as many art pieces in the apartment as there had been at the gallery. Tannek was a serious art collector.

"Liam, this is Mr. MacGyver," Varina said by way of introductions as she helped him hobble toward an expensive-looking sofa. "He was injured while saving our lives."

The man towered over MacGyver, then scooped him up in massive arms and carried him to the sofa. "I shall fetch a fresh ice pack for his knee," he said in a deep, accented voice. "Will the master be returning soon? Or shall I fetch some pain medication now?"

"I think I'll be fine with just the ice," Mac said, looking up at the man. "I don't care much for drugs."

"Nicholas has some old herbal remedies," Varina suggested, kneeling on the floor next to MacGyver and gently touching his knee. "Perhaps you would prefer a natural aid?"

"What are you doing?!" Mac demanded, scrambling up the back of the sofa when she reached for his fly.

"You'll have to remove your pants so I can wrap that knee," she said, sitting back on her heels and looking at him, amusement shining in her black eyes. "Did you think I was planning to ravish you?"

The thought had crossed my mind, actually. Feeling nine kinds of a fool, I stood up and removed my jeans--making sure I turned my back to the others first. I could feel Varina's smile as she looked away, but I couldn't help it--I'm shy.

Liam brought Mac a terry robe--one of Nicholas', to judge from the monogram on the pocket. It fit reasonably well, although a bit large, and MacGyver obediently sat down on the sofa again and bore Varina's gentle ministrations without further protest. Her fingers were cool against his skin as she wrapped his sprained knee with the elastic bandage. "How does that feel?"

"Better, thanks," he said, watching her perplexedly. "So, what do we do now?"

"Wait for some word from Nicholas."

"Just wait?"

"Well," she amended, "up to a point. Nicholas has often said patience is the only virtue I have in limited quantity, and I fear he's right--at least when it concerns him."

Mac smiled at her frankness. "Yeah, sometimes I have trouble with that one, too."

"Until we hear from him, you must rest," she decided, her tone brisk and businesslike. "Liam will prepare you a meal, if you will inform him of your desire. Would you prefer a bed, Mr. MacGyver? This apartment contains enough guest rooms--you should be able to find one that is comfortable enough."

"Right here is just fine--I'm not an invalid," Mac reminded her, giving his head a small shake. "And I'm not hungry."

"Perhaps some juice, or tea? Liam, you did purchase some herbal tea, didn't you?"

"I'm fine," Mac cut in.

Varina's large dark eyes looked sad. "Yes, of course, I understand. You're afraid of being drugged, and you feel safer here where you know there's an exit. If you accept the offer of a bed, you might be locked in, become a prisoner. Your caution is wise."

Her perception was unnerving. And I felt guilty at hurting her feelings with my suspicions. A fellow could drown in those eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said, catching her hand as she began to turn away. "I didn't mean to insult you, Varina. But I really am just fine, I promise."

"You will let us know if you need anything?"

"On my honor," Mac swore, lifting his other hand while maintaining his grip on hers. "While we wait for Nicholas, why don't you tell me more about Murdoc and why you think he's a...uh...vampire."

She sat beside him on the sofa when he gave a gentle tug on her hand. "It's not a recent development, MacGyver. Murdoc has been one of our Blood for nearly as long as I have. However, he *has* become more and more evil, and his recent obsession with you has forced us to take these steps. Have you not often thought that he's not quite human?"

MacGyver's brow furrowed as he considered this revelation. "He's survived death more times than I care to count, that's true. But..."

"But you still cannot believe it?"

Mac shook his head. "Murdoc told me he had a younger sister--I met her, helped him save her life."

Varina smiled and lifted her shoulders in a shrug. "If he had come to you and told you he needed your help to save the life of his descendent--perhaps the last of the line he had begotten before he became a vampire--would you have helped him? He told you what you could believe, MacGyver."

Mac took a deep breath. "Yeah--guess so." He was silent a moment, then asked, "Did you or Nicholas know him--back then?"

"Unfortunately, no. Perhaps we could have prevented all this if we had. His mentor led him down the path of evil, taught him the ways of terror. I do not believe he can change, although I do know of one who saw that was not the way and did change." She paused, studied her hands. "Murdoc has refused to listen to us, says the old ways are best and we should use them to our advantage for we are superior to mortals. But we were all mortals once, and we are not immortal or infallible. We must use our advantages to help, not destroy mankind."

Mac nodded slowly, acknowledging the truth of her words. "So you and Nicholas are sort of in my profession? You're trouble-shooters, then?"

"You might say that, MacGyver."

"How did you find out so much about me," he persisted.

"We have our ways," she smiled. "Now, I think you really ought to put your leg up and rest for a while. I shall get a pillow for you to prop up that knee, and then I'll get you a fresh ice pack--"

"I appreciate your concern," MacGyver interrupted, "but the swelling's almost gone now. It feels a lot better, really."

She paused, looking at him speculatively, then gave a little start as the telephone rang. After three rings, she moved to the table and lifted the receiver. "Yes? Nicholas..."

MacGyver watched her face as she listened to the voice on the other end of the line. Evidently it was not Nicholas, for her eyes hardened and her voice became cold. "Murdoc. You have failed..."

Mac came up off the sofa, and snatched the receiver from her. "Murdoc--"

"Ah, the valiant MacGyver, coming to the rescue," sneered the hated voice. "Do you know just what you're getting involved in? Do you know what she is?"

"A woman in trouble, if she's trying to fight you," Mac said tersely.

"Oh, but she's much more than that, or hasn't she told you? Has she told you that she isn't like the others, that she's not a throat-ripping monster? No doubt you believed it, trusting soul that you are."

"Get to the point, Murdoc," MacGyver said. "What do you want?"

"Oh, I think it's more a matter of what the lady wants right now," the voice answered. "Tell her I have her beloved Nicky at the place where the light fades. If she brings you to me, I may release him." There was an evil chuckle. "Then again, I may not. See you soon, MacGyver. Oh, and make sure you have plenty of sea-sickness tablets. I wouldn't want you feeling ill from the trip." Laughing, Murdoc hung up.

"What did he mean by that?" Mac asked, hanging up the receiver. "Sea-sickness tablets? Where the light fades?"

"To the west," she said, standing up and pacing. "Sea-sickness would indicate we must travel by water or at least cross a great expanse of it. And if he has taken Nicholas' shoes from him, he will grow weak in time. Liam, prepare

two bags--one for me and one for Nicholas. I must be sure we have an adequate supply of earth, and extra shoes."

"Shoes? Why are you so concerned with *shoes*?" Mac asked, getting up and hobbling after her.

"Either you have forgotten or refuse to believe what I told you about wearing shoes lined with our native soil," she said, hurrying down a hallway that was lined with paintings. "It decreases our need for blood, makes sunlight and water more tolerable. If he deprived Nicholas of his soil, then he will be more vulnerable to whatever tortures Murdoc has planned."

"Great," Mac muttered, pausing and leaning against the wall to belt his robe more securely before continuing to follow Varina. He stepped across a room's threshold and stopped suddenly as he realized Varina was unbuttoning her dress. Whirling away from her, Mac said over his shoulder, "There's an abandoned lighthouse on an island off the Coast, about fifteen miles northwest of here. Murdoc could have taken Tannek there, I suppose. Uh, are you going with me?"

"Of course," Varina said matter-of-factly. "I must."

"I don't think that's a good idea," Mac began, starting to look over his shoulder, then quickly staring straight ahead again when he glimpsed Varina clad in a black lace teddy and stockings. "I'm sorry--I'll get dressed and catch a cab down to the pier right away..."

"Wait, MacGyver," Varina told him. "I will be ready to go with you shortly."

"Yeah, okay," Mac said with a shake of his head. *Just what I needed--a sexy, beautiful woman who believed she was a vampire, accompanying me on a mission to rescue a man who was also a vampire from the most deadly professional assassin I've ever known who is also supposed to be a vampire. Just great.*

Mac hurriedly scrambled into his clothes, tossing the borrowed robe on the sofa. Maybe he could slip out before she was dressed...

Liam was standing guard on the door, two valises on the floor beside him. "I shall drive you and my lady," said the giant, arms folded his broad chest.

So much for sneaking out...

"Yeah," Mac said, backing away. "I'll just wait over here," he added, pointing at the sofa.

"Oh, good, I see you have the cases," Varina said, coming into the room and pulling on a windbreaker. She was dressed in tight black slacks, high black boots and a thick Irish cable-knit sweater. "Liam, I want you to stay here in case Nicholas returns--you know Murdoc may be lying and doesn't even have him. Someone must be here to let Nicholas know what has happened. You can drive, can't you, MacGyver? After all, you do know where we are going." She reached for the cases, but Liam picked them up first and stalked out the door with them.

"Maybe you could just leave Nicholas a note," Mac said. "We might need Liam's help--"

"Yes, perhaps that would be best," she said after a moment. "Liam has come to my rescue more than once."

Somehow that didn't surprise me. It didn't reassure me a whole lot either.

Mac watched as Varina scribbled a few lines on a notepad. "I can't talk you out of this?"

"No," she said, looking up into his eyes, her expression calm and determined.

MacGyver ran a hand through his hair, and sighed. "Then let's go."

*

Half an hour later, MacGyver stood beside Varina and Liam on the deck of the chartered motorboat. "It's not far now," he said from his position at the helm.

"I hope not," she said, her hands gripping Liam's arm. "I'm not a comfortable sailor, even after all these centuries."

Centuries--right. She was certainly playing it out. I still wasn't too sure about this Liam, and just what his place was in this scheme. He seemed quite protective of her, there was no doubt about that. Of course, didn't vampires always have their servants? Ol' Drac had his Renfield...but I got the feeling

this guy didn't eat bugs, but rather chewed nails.

"You know we're walking into a trap." Mac called over his shoulder. "Murdoc will have some of his little surprises waiting for us."

"Yes. I know. If you would prefer to remain in the boat and wait for us. Liam and I shall seek Nicholas." Varina told him. "It isn't right of me to expect you to place yourself in such danger on our behalf--"

"Oh, no, that's perfectly all right." Mac said with a shake of his head. "I mean, that's what this is all about, isn't it? Helping you rescue Tannek who is being used as bait by Murdoc? Or is it that Murdoc is the bait to draw *me* in?"

"I don't understand." she said, coming up behind him. "You are saying you suspect that *I* am leading you into a trap? That we are working with Murdoc?"

MacGyver raised his head and blinked, then turned to face Varina. He was aware, out of the corner of his eye, of Liam shifting his stance slightly.

Ignoring the taller man, Mac said evenly, "I won't deny that thought has crossed my mind, Varina. Right now, I'm not sure *what* I believe. But if Murdoc *is* waiting for us, we're going to have to trust each other." He paused, then added, "I apologize, Varina."

"As do I," she said softly, one hand covering his as it rested on the wheel. "I am expecting too much too soon, and you *are* only Human."

Mac wasn't certain if she was accusing him or excusing him for that, so he merely quirked a smile at her. "We're here," he announced as he shut off the engine.

Liam was already scrambling from the boat and was assisting Varina to shore, making certain she didn't get so much as a toe wet by carrying her.

By the time Mac joined them, Liam had taken the line and secured the boat to the dock while Varina stood staring at the lighthouse.

"Liam, I think perhaps you should go around to the back and see if there is another way inside," she said. "No point in all three of us falling into a trap."

Liam and Mac looked at each other. "As you wish, madam," the tall man said before MacGyver could object to this plan. He went reluctantly, though, and Mac could see he wasn't very pleased about it.

"Wait a minute," MacGyver called. "Varina, there's no reason for any of us to fall into a trap--"

"Of course not," she said. "And if we split up, we will have twice the chance of finding Nicholas all the sooner." With that, she started across the rocky beach, heading purposefully towards the lighthouse above them.

Mac rolled his eyes heavenward, sighed, and started after her.

The door to the lighthouse stood open in an obvious invitation, one that Varina accepted before Mac could stop her. Catching her by the arm, he started to drag her back outside, but the door slammed shut behind them.

She didn't seem surprised, merely nodded as if she had fully expected it. "Wood," she said succinctly.

"Wood?"

"Wooden stake through the heart--surely you have heard of that, MacGyver. There is something about wood that is deadly to us," she informed him, perfectly calm. "Nicholas has done numerous experiments over the years in an effort to isolate the particular element, but so far he has been unsuccessful. Silver, on the other hand, seems to affect only certain ones of our kind--the ones who subscribe to evil. There is a legend among us that steel forged in vampire blood has some sort of power over us, but we have never encountered it."

Mac gave his head a shake, breaking the spell she'd been weaving with her fantastic revelations. It was then he noticed that she'd been systematically inspecting the tiny entrance hall and she was opening a small hatch just above her head.

"I'll never fit--"

"No, but I shall," she said, crossing her wrists and grasping the hem of her sweater.

Realizing she was intending to pull it over her head, Mac made a mad grab to stop her. "What are you--"

"It's a very narrow fit," she informed him, dropping the sweater to the

floor.

Mac swallowed hard in relief at the sight of her leotard top. It certainly did nothing to hide her curves, her breasts swelling above the low neckline, but at least she wasn't naked.

"I am not certain where this leads, but the air is fresh," she said after springing up and pulling herself through the opening. Mac had been about to offer her a hand up and his jaw dropped at this show of unusual agility.

"Do you have to go through all that? Can't you just turn into smoke or something?" Mac asked, studying the opening and realizing his shoulders were far too wide to even begin squeezing through.

"Oh, MacGyver," she chided softly.

He gave a little shrug of embarrassment. "Hey, wait a minute! You're not gonna just leave me here, are you?!"

"If Nicholas *is* in this place, I must get to him," she called back as she crawled out of his sight. "You must find a way to follow."

"Easy for you to say," MacGyver muttered. He stared at the crawlspace until he could no longer distinguish Varina's form, then sighed and glanced around.

He stood in a sort of ante-chamber, but it had no visible exits except the door they had entered by, and the vent Varina had disappeared through. This was a narrow opening set some eight or nine feet from the flagstoned floor, and Mac was aware of the slight breeze emanating from it. Fresh air, as she had said. He eyed the walls and ceiling speculatively, then shook his head and turned to face the door.

MacGyver avoided stepping on the center of the floor, remembering Murdoc was particularly fond of trap doors. Keeping close to the walls, he edged his way to the closed door. It was ten feet high and four feet wide, made of oaken panels, four inches thick, and banded with iron.

It looked like something that belonged in the Sheriff of Nottingham's castle. Just for appearance's sake, I gave it a try. No luck. The door was as solid as they came, probably barred on the other side.

But it was either the door, or Murdoc's trap door--unless I could find another passage such as Varina had found. And even that would probably be another of his little traps, or part of his plan. Why do I get myself into these things?!

"For shame, MacGyver," came Murdoc's disembodied voice. "What sort of knight errant are you to allow the--*lady?*--to walk into a trap like that? I *am* disappointed in you, old boy."

"Sorry about that," Mac said, looking around and finally spying the tiny grille in the ceiling above where Varina had disappeared. "But then again, if she's working for you, she's fine, isn't she?"

"Such a suspicious streak you're displaying today, MacGyver! It's unlike you. But no, you can set your mind at rest on that score. I work alone."

"All right," Mac said slowly, his gaze sweeping the antechamber, "you've got me, Murdoc. Let Varina go."

"Now why should I do that, MacGyver? I have a score to settle with her. She really shouldn't have gone babbling to you about me--a man is *entitled* to his little secrets."

Mac heaved a little sigh. "I don't want to play your little games, Murdoc. I'm tired, and I was on vacation. I don't believe in vampires--"

"But you will, I promise. Do you know what can kill a vampire? There's always the stake in the heart, of course. Garlic is really quite useless, although it is a turn-off because of the overwhelming odor. Sunlight? Sometimes, if the exposure is prolonged and intense."

"So that leaves holy water and silver bullets," Mac said impatiently. "Listen, Murdoc, I don't--"

"Silver bullets are for werewolves," Murdoc interrupted, "and as for holy water, it depends on whether the vampire you're after believes in the Deity or not. But you've forgotten to mention the one thing that will most assuredly harm--or kill--a vampire." He chuckled unpleasantly. "It's fire, MacGyver. Lovely, dangerous fire. Like that fire that your lady friend has just encountered."

"What?" Mac spun around, hands on the wall.

"Badly burned, I'm afraid. But still alive. Would you care to see? I'd be cautious, if I were you--no telling her state of mind. A wounded vampire can be an ugly thing."

Murdoc's chilling laugh surrounded Mac just as the floor was pulled out from under him and he landed hard in a pit.

Mac lay still for a few moments, waiting for the air to return to his lungs. Gingerly he sat up and tested his limbs, getting to his feet when he realized nothing was broken. Dusting off his hands, he began to inspect his prison.

"I know how valiantly you've searched for the lady," came Murdoc's voice. Unfortunately for you, you've found her. I hope it's good for you, MacGyver."

Mac blinked in the dim light. "Varina?" he called softly, peering around the dungeon. There was a form huddled in one corner and he slowly approached it.

"Stay back, MacGyver," she commanded, her voice filled with agony. "You must find a way out of here before it's too late."

Mac took a step toward her, freezing in his tracks and not sure why.

"You must not come any closer! I...am not myself," she said, drawing herself up against the wall.

As Mac's vision adjusted to the near-darkness, he stared in horror at her. Burns covered her neck, chest and arms; he reached out a hand, then drew back.

"You are wondering how this can be if I am what I claim to be," she said, hands lying listlessly in her lap. "How can a vampire be harmed? Again you are influenced by the cinema--we *can* be hurt, feel pain, even die the true death. Fire most certainly can kill us, and Murdoc knows it. He is sadistic. I regret we--*I* brought you into this." She closed her eyes, head leaned back against the wall.

Mac knelt in front of her, hesitant to touch her. "We've got to get you out of here and to a hospital..."

She opened her eyes and gave him a small smile. "They can do little for me. I shall recover, in time." Raw need burned in her eyes and she averted her gaze. "Please--put some distance between us."

A puzzled look crossed his face, and Mac sat back on his heels.

"There is only one thing that would help me, and I am not willing because I know you would not be. I *am* a vampire, MacGyver. Blood can ease the pain, speed the healing. That is why Murdoc put you in here--to torture me with the nearness of what I need, but will not take."

"Me? You think--he wants you to attack *me*?" Mac asked in disbelief.

"It is what he would do in the same circumstances. Please, MacGyver, you must go," she pleaded, refusing to look at him. "As far from me as you can--"

"Varina, you honestly don't believe yourself capable of *attacking* me, do you?" Mac persisted, gently touching one burned hand.

She turned her gaze fully on him and Mac froze. Entranced, he slowly reached up and unbuttoned his shirt, baring his neck and leaning toward her.

"No! I will not!" she cried, breaking eye contact and freeing Mac from her spell.

His complacency shaken, Mac scrambled to the far corner and sat with his back pressed to the wall. Hugging his knees to his chest, he stared at her with wide-eyed horror.

With a moan of despair she curled up in a fetal position, her back to the quivering MacGyver. "Please don't hate me, MacGyver. I am what I am."

A vampire. An honest-to-God vampire, who had nearly bitten my neck. And I would have let her.

Logically, I knew there were no such things as vampires, but I had seen some things that shook my logic. My Grandpa Harry always said that sometimes logic wasn't everything, that you had to take a few things on faith. What would Harry have done in this situation?

She believed she needed blood--what would it hurt if I cut my fingers for her?

Murdoc's voice said, "Oh, come on, MacGyver, comfort the poor lady, why don't you? Or has your sense of chivalry reached its limits at last? Pity, I was hoping you'd be ever so much more entertaining."

"Sorry to disappoint you," Mac rallied enough to say, looking upward.

"I suppose I shall have to turn to Tannek for my entertainment--"

"No!"

Mac swung his gaze to Varina who was sitting up. The burns didn't look as bad, as if she'd healed several days in the last hour.

Wild laughter was Murdoc's only response. Mac stood up and started toward Varina.

Varina struggled to her feet and Mac saw only an injured woman needing help.

"Here now, you need to rest," he chided, starting to take her by the arms and drawing back at the sight of the still painful-looking burns.

"I won't hurt you," she said bitterly. "Why can no one accept us for what we are, believe without fear and loathing?"

"You and Nicholas tried to help me, in spite of the danger to yourselves," Mac said quietly, touching her hand. "Please let me help you, Varina. I'm not afraid of you." He met her gaze and smiled self-consciously. "I *do* believe in you, and I want to help."

"I know you do, but I have never fed on fear and I will not start now. I can see fear in your eyes, MacGyver, no matter how bravely you try to mask it. You see, it isn't merely the blood I need but the emotion as well. Murdoc feeds on terror, but there is no sustenance in that. You are too close--don't aid Murdoc's torture," she said, drawing away from him. "You *have* begun to believe in vampires, but the ones who kill and terrorize. When Nicholas and I--share life, it is with pleasure. I cannot--will not--take in fear."

She sank down into the corner, staring at the burns on her arms and chest. "I will not heal in time to help Nicholas," she said, clenched fists in her lap.

Mac scrubbed the palms of his hands on his jeans, then knelt in front of her. "How much do you need?"

Her head came up and hope flared in her lovely eyes. "A cup, no more."

"And I won't miss it?" He swallowed hard and she touched his cheek.

"Have you donated blood? It is much like that, except my way is more pleasurable," she assured him. "I can compel you, if you wish, go into your mind and ease your fears."

"I'm not afraid," Mac insisted. "Having someone mess with my mind--*that* scares me. Helping you doesn't scare me, Varina, it just--unnerves me. I *am* afraid of hurting you--those burns..."

"Don't think about them," she said softly, touching his face with gentle fingers. "My need for you hurts far more than the physical wounds."

"You'd better tell me what to do," Mac said after a moment. Unbuttoning his shirt cuff, he held his bared wrist out toward her.

Varina smiled and kissed his wrist, then leaned forward and touched her lips to his.

MacGyver's eyes widened as she kissed him, moving from his mouth to his throat, her hands reaching up to open his shirt and caressing his chest.

With a thump he sat on the floor, his back against the wall while she crawled on his lap. "Are you sure this is--"

"Trust me, MacGyver. Just relax and give in to your senses. Close your eyes and give yourself over to the pleasure."

Her voice was hypnotic, but Mac didn't feel like she'd taken over his mind. He *was* still in control.

Eyes closed, Mac let her lips and hands work an incredible magic. He'd had numerous girl friends over the years, mostly before he'd gone to work at the Foundation, and the sex had always been good. But this woman was taking him to heights never even imagined.

There was a sharp pain at his neck, but he soon forgot it as the most intense pleasure he'd ever experienced climaxed. He would never be able to put into words the thrill and joy he felt as his essence was absorbed by Varina.

When he opened his eyes he was lying on the dirt floor, his head pillowed in her lap.

"How do you feel?" she asked anxiously. "I am afraid I got a bit carried away--it was too intense for you. My need overwhelmed us both." One cool hand

stroked his face.

"I'm all right," MacGyver said muzzily, blinking several times and lifting his head from the most comfortable pillow he'd ever had. With Varina's help he sat up and stared at her. "Varina--your hands!"

She held them up before her, then smiled at him. "I did tell you what I needed, MacGyver."

I couldn't believe my eyes--her hands were perfectly unblemished, all trace of the burns gone. Even as I watched, the skin on her forearms was knitting itself, smoothing away the ugly blisters I'd seen there only minutes before. I put my fingers up to my neck. It was a little tender to the touch, that was all.

"Thank you," Varina said, as she caught Mac's hand and drew it away from the mark she had made. Turning it over, she kissed his palm. "Very much."

"You're welcome," he said. "And we're getting out of here."

"I doubt *that*, MacGyver," Murdoc's voice boomed. "I doubt it very much."

"Aw, where's your faith, Murdoc?" retorted Mac, standing up and looking warily around the chamber. "Have I ever disappointed you before?"

"Yes, you have--by refusing to die!" Murdoc shouted. "But this time you won't escape!"

"They had better dialogue in the silent movies," Mac said. "Show yourself, Murdoc. I really dislike talking to walls."

A panel slid open in the ceiling, revealing a closed circuit television screen. Murdoc's image saluted his captives. "Happy, MacGyver?"

"Nice," Mac commented. "Not exactly period furnishings, though, is it? Or do all vampire's hide-aways have spy cameras?"

"So you finally believe!" Murdoc said, with a smirk that displayed his elongated canines. "I'm so glad you enjoyed the lady's attentions, MacGyver, since they're the last pleasurable sensations you're likely to experience on this earth. What I have planned for you will be considerably more painful--and quite slow, I'm afraid."

"Those might be your plans, but you'll never carry them out," Varina swore, staring up at the screen.

"Who's going to stop me? Certainly not *you*. And not your husband."

"Husband?!" Mac yelped. "You and Tannek are married?"

"It's all right, MacGyver," Varina assured him, her mind not fully on him. "What have you done to Nicholas?"

"I've taken care of that spot of trouble," Murdoc assured her, grinning evilly.

Varina closed her eyes and Mac wondered if she was going to faint--or did vampires do that? She remained absolutely still for a moment, then opened her eyes and smiled. "He's not dead," she said with absolute certainty.

"Perhaps not yet," Murdoc said with a shrug. "By the way, MacGyver, he enjoyed your little--performance--just now. Yes, I allowed him to watch--tsk, tsk. Boy Scout MacGyver dallying with another man's--wife."

"You know it is not like that for us," Varina said sharply. "Jealousy has no place in our lives. I know that Nicholas felt gratitude for what MacGyver did for me--"

"MacGyver lives by a different set of moral codes, my dear," Murdoc laughed. "No doubt his little choir-boy heart is appalled at what he's done. Don't worry, MacGyver, you won't have to live with your guilt for long."

Mac saw Murdoc's hand reach for something out of the camera frame. "Watch out!" He lunged toward Varina and knocked her down, shielding her with his body as dirt and masonry rained down on the spot where she had been standing.

They sat up amid the settling dust and stared at the wooden stake that had embedded itself in the floor.

"Thank you, MacGyver," Varina murmured, her voice shaky.

"Oh, *well* done, MacGyver," Murdoc mocked. "But we're just getting started. I'll see you soon. And by the way--welcome to the club. You're one of us now." With a burst of maniacal laughter, Murdoc's image vanished from the screen above their heads.

MacGyver and Varina looked at each other. "I was getting tired of that

program anyway," Mac said, dead-pan. "You'd think this hotel could afford cable-TV." He rose to one knee, preparing to stand, then paused as Varina touched his sleeve.

"MacGyver--you don't believe his lies, do you?"

"I've learned never to believe Murdoc, except when he announces a target," Mac said, avoiding a direct answer.

"But you're not certain, are you? You're afraid of the consequences of what we've done. You must believe me when I say you are in no danger of becoming one of our Blood. I would have to take from you five, maybe six times or take too deeply. For now, there is a bond between us, that much is true. I could summon you, if I so chose, and I would feel you through the link if I opened my mind to you. But I would never do such a thing, MacGyver. That would be a betrayal of your trust. You must believe me."

Mac looked into her eyes, then nodded. "All right, I believe you, Varina." He patted her hand and quirked a smile at her. "Could we discuss this later--after we get out of here? Hmm?"

"Of course," she answered, allowing him to help her to her feet. "Have you a plan?"

"Maybe," he said, going over to the stake and pulling it up. It was nearly six feet long, and as thick around as his wrist. Mac hefted it, then looked up at the ceiling trap door through which he had fallen.

Varina followed his gaze, nodded. "Yes, I could use it to pull you up, once I'm topside. But then we would be right back where we started, wouldn't we?"

Mac did a double-take at the idea, then hefted the stake. "So far it's our only weapon, but we won't have it long if Murdoc has anything to say about it."

"I wonder what has happened to Liam," Varina fretted, looking around their prison. "I hope he's all right."

"Well, we can't help him or Nicholas as long as we're here," Mac said, studying the alcove that held the television set. He placed the stake at an angle so that one end rested firmly beneath the set. Testing it, he scrambled up the stake as if he were climbing a ship's mast. Holding on with one hand, he pulled the monitor forward. "Stand back," he warned, as he toppled it onto the floor. Barely sparing it a glance, MacGyver turned his attention to the space it had occupied. "There's a passage here," he called down to Varina. "I think we could both make it, if--" he paused, shrugged. "If you don't mind risking more booby-traps, that is."

"For Nicholas I would risk anything," she said, wrapping her hands around the stake. "I will be right behind you."

"Oh, I think not," Murdoc said as soon as Mac had entered the passage. A metal sheet slammed shut behind him, cutting him off from Varina. "You see, MacGyver, I do have plans for you and I don't want her interference. I have a little surprise for her--do you know how hard it is to drug a vampire? I found a chemist who found the idea--challenging. Of course, once she had some measure of success, I had to kill her. Can't afford to let someone like that live, can I? She might have tried to use it on me."

"Varina!" shouted MacGyver, ignoring Murdoc. He twisted around and put his hands against the metal barrier. "Varina, be careful! He's--"

"It's too late," Murdoc said, sounding bored. "For you, too, MacGyver."

Mac heard a hiss and swung around, his eyes widening at the gas cloud drifting into his face. Coughing, he ducked under it, trying to crawl forward on his stomach.

He got twenty feet before he collapsed, unconscious.

*

Blinding pain tore through his head, and Mac cracked his eyes open, moaned, and squeezed them shut.

"Sorry about that, MacGyver. An unfortunate side effect," Murdoc said, and Mac turned his head to see the assassin standing next to him. Lifting his head, Mac saw that he was bound to a gurney, a rubber strap tied around his right arm.

"I understand it doesn't last long... But then, neither will you."

"How reassuring," Mac said dryly.

Murdoc flashed a syringe before Mac's eyes, and jabbed the needle into the bulging vein. "This is ever so much neater than a bite. Not nearly as pleasurable--but quicker and less messy. Once I drink this, you will belong to me, bound to obey my will. But the treat doesn't stop there, MacGyver. I am going to share my blood with you, and then you will be my fledgling, bound to me for eternity."

"You're going to turn me into a vampire?!" Mac asked incredulously.

"Rather a crude way of putting it," Murdoc said, watching as the syringe's ampule filled with MacGyver's blood. "But correct." He withdrew the needle, dabbed at the oozing injection site in Mac's arm with a bit of cotton, then held up the syringe for his captive's inspection. "You have excellent veins, MacGyver."

"You're sick, Murdoc," Mac retorted, struggling against the straps holding him down.

"Vampirism is not a disease," Murdoc said virtuously. "It's simply--a lifestyle." He removed the needle from the syringe, then poured the ampule's contents into a crystal wine glass. "Cheers, MacGyver," he said in a mocking toast, before drinking his blood.

Mac turned his head away, feeling nausea wash over him. "Why?" he managed to ask.

"Why? I was hungry." Murdoc smiled, then went to stand beside his prisoner. "You mean why am I going to such lengths to do this to you? Because it's the only way I can be certain you'll leave me alone--you and your insufferable do-gooder tendencies. Just think, MacGyver--we'll be blood brothers." He chuckled.

Mac rolled his head at the pun. "I don't want to be in your 'family', thanks just the same."

"You don't have a choice."

The chill in Murdoc's voice caused MacGyver to look at him, and he recoiled at the utter hatred in the assassin's eyes.

"*Be* afraid, MacGyver," Murdoc told him, nodding in approval. "It gives the blood a much more piquant flavor." He showed his teeth in a feral smile, then held up a scalpel.

With a swift gesture, Murdoc slit the vein in his left wrist, then extended his hand toward MacGyver. "Time for a little drink now. You'll feel much better afterwards... Eventually."

"No," Mac protested, turning his head aside.

Murdoc gripped Mac's chin with his right hand, pulling down on it to force his mouth open. "Come now, MacGyver, it's happy hour..."

Mac struggled frantically, and suddenly Murdoc's hand was gone.

Lifting his head, Mac saw Murdoc facing Varina--at least, he *thought* it was Varina. She was snarling at the assassin, hatred burning in her black eyes as her hands reached for Murdoc's throat.

"What have you done to Nicholas?!" she demanded. "I can no longer feel him through our bond."

"Fire is probably the most effective destroyer of vampires," Murdoc said, choking off when she lunged at him and wrapped her hands around his throat.

Mac strained against his bonds, trying desperately to free himself and go to her aid.

Murdoc was gripping Varina's wrists, struggling to free himself from the crazed woman. They crashed into an equipment cart and took it with them to the floor. Glass vials shattered under them, but they were scarcely noticed.

The scalpel lay on the gurney near Mac's head. He craned toward it, managing to pick it up between his teeth. Lifting the scalpel gingerly, Mac tried to saw through the band across his chest. Halfway through, the scalpel slipped from his mouth and clattered to the floor.

Mac sank back onto the gurney in frustration. Rallying, he gathered his strength for another try, and lifted his head again. He saw Murdoc's hand closing over the hypodermic syringe. "Varina! Look out!"

Eyes glittering dangerously, she drew back and out of his reach. "Why should I fear that? Drugs have no effect on our kind--"

"Ah, but this is a special drug, created just for you," Murdoc grinned. "You've already had a taste of the gas... It didn't keep you out as long as I had expected, but it did work. This little poison is slow-acting, causing intense pain before resulting in an agonizing death. It was designed specifically for our kind, and I have tested it--"

"Do you think I care about death? I have no wish to continue without Nicholas, but I swear I shall take you with me," Varina said, advancing on him. "Shall we see if your little poison works on you as well?"

Murdoc backed up, bumping into the gurney. Mac had worked one foot free and he kicked out, catching Murdoc's wrist and knocking the syringe to the floor. Murdoc dove for it and Varina threw herself on top of him as they grappled for the elusive syringe.

"This is for Nicholas!" Varina screamed, jabbing him with the deadly needle.

Frantically Murdoc pulled it from his chest and kicked at her with both feet, knocking her against Mac's gurney and sending it slamming into the wall.

Agony exploded in MacGyver's head and neck with the impact. Half-stunned, gritting his teeth against crying out, he was vaguely aware of the door flying open and two figures rushing into the room. "Nicholas?!" he muttered with surprise, just before a red haze covered his eyes.

*

MacGyver regained consciousness to find Varina standing at the foot of his gurney, her beautiful eyes filled with anxiety. "Are you all right, MacGyver?"

He blinked, swallowed, and nodded gingerly, wincing at the pain that caused. "Yeah, sure," he said. He sensed someone else standing beside him, and turned his head to see Nicholas. "Aren't you supposed to be dead?"

"Murdoc never had Nicholas here," Varina said. "He just wanted me to think he did. Can you believe it, MacGyver? He sent Nicholas on a wild duck chase!"

Mac frowned. "Wild goose chase?"

"Yes, that's it," she agreed, unruffled by the correction.

"Take it easy," Nicholas advised, helping Mac to sit up. "You've suffered a mild concussion, possibly whiplash as well, to say nothing of blood loss." He smiled at Mac's curious expression. "I'm a doctor, as well as an art dealer."

"Great." Mac paused, then looked around the room. "Murdoc--"

"Gone, no doubt to lick his wounds," Varina said, gripping Mac's hand. "Are you certain you're all right? You look so deathly pale."

Mac felt deathly pale, but he gave her a weak grin. "I've been a lot worse. Murdoc escaped?"

"He won't get far--I gave him a dose of his own poison," Varina pointed out.

Nicholas motioned for Liam and the giant swept Mac up in his arms. "We must go--I don't have much faith in Murdoc's concoction."

Varina stroked Nicholas' cheek. "That gas of his did render me unconscious, and it even paralyzed our bond--"

"Only temporarily," Nicholas reminded her. "Let's go, my heart. This place is not safe--he may have bombs set."

"Yeah, that sounds like something Murdoc would do," Mac said. "Listen, I can walk--"

Liam lifted an eyebrow, then set MacGyver on his feet. As soon as he let go of him, however, Mac's legs gave out under him and he sagged. "Maybe not," Mac said ruefully, as Nicholas and Liam reached to steady him.

Without a word, Liam once more swept him up and Mac kept his mouth shut, letting the man carry him like a baby, from the lighthouse to the waiting boat. There was no sign of Murdoc, and Mac wondered if the assassin really had crawled off to die or had just retreated.

Liam took the wheel while Nicholas sat in silence next to Mac with Varina on his lap. Mac couldn't help noticing the way she clung to Tannek, as if afraid she'd lose him.

"You have nothing to fear," she said abruptly, turning her gaze to Mac. "Murdoc may have partaken of your blood, but he has no control over you. For what comfort it may be, you are mine in that respect."

Mac nodded slowly, not quite sure what to say to that. "He tried to make me take his blood. He said I'd be like him, and under his power. I'm glad he failed." He smiled a little. "Thanks."

Varina's eyes filled with compassion, and she reached over to touch his cheek. "I am the one who owes you my thanks, MacGyver."

"We both do," Nicholas added, tightening his grip on his wife's free hand.

It was pretty obvious that she had filled him in on what had happened in Murdoc's dungeon, and that he didn't hold any grudges. I was real glad about that.

MacGyver nodded again, leaning back against the seat and closing his eyes. Several minutes later, he said, "I can just see the look on Pete's face if I try to tell him what I did on my summer vacation! Guess I won't."

Varina and Nicholas looked at one another, then burst out laughing. Mac joined in. It felt good, and his head didn't even hurt--much.

- The End -



INSTINCT

by

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"He believed me," I said, looking after the retreating back.

"So he did," Hutch agreed.

"How come?"

"Are you complaining? Schenke didn't. He thinks you and Knight are both nuts. Does that make you feel better?"

"I didn't expect much else," I shrugged. "But why did Knight buy it?"

"Why not? I did."

"You don't count. You're my partner."

"And such a joy it is, too. Let's go. We can see about getting some background on this place."

I looked back at the empty building and frowned.

"Starsky?"

I took a breath and launched into it again. "There's something there."

My partner sighed with ill-concealed patience.

"Come on, buddy. You looked. I looked. Knight and Schenke looked. We found zip."

"Don't I know it," I groused.

Frustration outweighed anger. How could I get angry when I couldn't explain it myself, even *to* myself?

We got into the car, Hutch's car. I could feel him glancing at me even though I was staring out the window. We pulled up to HQ.

"Okay, Starsk," Hutch said, after a moment of just sitting in that rattletrap of his, "tell me exactly what you felt in that place."

"Don't you think I would tell you if I could?" I snapped.

So much for our "best buddies" routine. But Hutch had backed me in front of the others. Even now, he wasn't questioning my mental stability as much as trying to understand what I had sensed in that empty shell of a theater.

I didn't know what to tell him. Maybe I was going bananas after all.

Hutch was still waiting.

"I told you. The place just felt *wrong*, like... You remember the Dublonski murder?"

"All too well."

"Well, we went back there a few weeks later and it was all cleaned up and everything, but it still felt of...pain. Remember?"

"That was just the subconscious working, Starsky. We knew what happened there. It's only natural that we would sense..."

"All right. All right," I shook my head. "Then I'm crazy. Okay? Does that make *you* feel better?"

"I almost wish it did."

"I love you, too," I glared at him.

My partner sighed. "Let's go finish up the paperwork, so we can go home. I'm beat."

"Yeah. The night shift stinks."

"Words of wisdom, Starsk?"

"Why not?"
I trailed on after him.

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"You look like a man with a problem," Dr. Jack Farrel said, as he watched his friend Nick frown at an innocent piece of blank paper.
"Not a problem really, more of a puzzle. I met the Dynamic Duo today."
"Nick, if you're seeing Batman and Robin, you do have a problem."
"I met Detectives Starsky and Hutchinson."
"Oh, *that* Dynamic Duo. What did you think of them?"
"I'm not sure. Intrigued, I think."
"Why intrigued?"
"Several reasons."
"You're hedging," Farrel accused.
"I haven't figured them out yet."
"You and everybody else in the city. What did your favorite partner have to say?"
"Lots. And not much of it favorable. There seem to be a lot of rumors about them."
"That sounds like our dear Leon. They are something of a legend in the district. But they've earned most of their accolades--the hard way...." Jack trailed off. "How did you come to meet them?"
"They called in for backup on a 'shots fired'. We searched the whole place and didn't find anybody or anything."
"False alarm?"
"I don't think so. And neither did Starsky."
"What then?"
Knight crossed the room with a nervous burst of energy to examine the doctor's diploma.
"Did you know that Starsky's from New York and Hutchinson's from Minnesota?" He went on without waiting for an answer. "Isn't it strange that they would meet across so many miles?"
"Not so strange," Jack said patiently. "The same could be said for us. You have come a little distance yourself."
"Ah, but I've had the time to do it. When you think about it..."
"Nick, what is it?" the doctor broke in. "Why are you rambling like this?"
The young man sighed. "There was blood. A child's blood. Too much to be a skinned knee."
"What? You mean on the ground?"
"No. In the air. But then there were a lot of odd smells in that place."
"And what did the others think?"
"Nothing. But Starsky knew."
"Knew what?"
"That something happened there."
"...Was the child dead?" Jack asked.
"I don't know."
"Nick," the doctor frowned.
"I *don't* know. I'm not psychic. Thank God. Starsky could have a better idea than I do."
"And what did he say?"
"Just that he felt something."
"What about his partner, Hutchinson?"
"I don't think so. But he backed him."
"Now that is Starsky and Hutch, more than anything else you'll ever hear about them: they back each other all the way."
"Must be nice," Nick sighed.
"Schenke didn't approve, huh?"
"Not much. There was something else though. A memory of something..."
"What? Another smell?"

The young man nodded. "Something from long ago. I think, but I can't quite..."

"Something from your time with LaCroix?"

"Maybe."

"Hum. ...What about the kid? How old? Boy or girl?"

"...Young. Less than ten for sure. Probably a lot younger than that. I can't tell about the sex."

"Maybe two?"

"...Maybe."

"A two year old boy?"

"My nose is not that finely tuned." He made a face.

"Oh, I don't know. You put everybody else I know to shame."

"I sure hope so. Why the questions? About the child?"

Jack frowned. "...I think I want to show you something..."

*

By the time Hutch and me checked in the next night, I had almost convinced myself that it had all been my imagination doing a double wheelie.

My partner was looking over some notes.

"Whatcha got?" I said with some put-on cheerfulness as I looked around his shoulder.

"The Rivoli has a basement according to the City Planner."

"A what?"

"A basement, and perhaps something else. There seem to be some stairs that don't go anywhere off of that."

"I don't remember seeing any basement," I protested.

"Neither do I. So, let's go check it out," he said, as he led the way. "I'll even let you drive."

"You're too good to me."

"What else are partners for?"

I was unlocking the doors to the Torino when it hit me.

"*You* believed me," I said in amazement.

My partner stared at me a moment over the roof of my car. It was a familiar look. He was either going to hug me or kill me. Sometimes it seemed interchangeable.

"If you're trying to tell me," he said, very slowly, "that it was all a joke, I'm going to take you out to those smelly woods you love so much, and string you up from the highest tree."

And he would, too.

"Naw, that's okay. I wasn't kiddin'. It's just that..."

"What?!" hard and sharp, like gunfire.

He still might do it.

"I just wasn't sure I believed it myself."

"And why not?"

"Well, it's so...weird, y'know?"

Hutch sighed. "Look, if you go around questioning your own instincts, you're going to short circuit what little brain you've got."

Don't tell anybody, but I think that was a compliment.

"...Get into the car, Starsky."

"Yeah, sure."

So much for my clever comeback.

At the theater I was a little surprised to find an old, black Cadillac parked in front. The '59 convertible gleamed even in the street lights.

"Stop drooling, Starsk."

That's when I became aware that my mouth was open.

"I was not," I replied, as I pulled in behind the other car.

"Of course not. You always look like a beached guppy."

"Who you callin' a guppy, Blondie? A man can't appreciate a decent set of wheels without you makin' a wise crack?"

"Can you imagine the gas mileage that thing must get?" Hutch shook his head. "Somehow, I get the feelin' that Knight doesn't much care."

"At least it's a little more subtle than a jumped-up tomato salad."

"Tomato salad?" I sputtered. "I'll have you know this car is a classic."

"This car is a soup can with a rebuilt engine."

"That's better than a travelin' trash heap."

"Schenke," my partner muttered under his breath without changing expression.

And with that, the familiar exchange died a not-so-natural death.

"Well, well, well," came an irritating, cheerful voice along with a belligerent cock-of-the-walk stride. "If it isn't the Dynamic Duo. If you're looking for Batgirl, he's inside somewhere, digging around."

I walked by him with quiet dignity. Hutch managed a clipped nod.

"Don't forget your flashlights," Schenke called after us. "There's still no electricity."

We waved with them without looking back.

Dynamic Duo.

Grr-rr. Not one of my more favorite nicknames. That's mainly because I have my own suspicions as to who is supposed to be the "Robin" of this particular twosome. It's not that I have any objections to short pants. I mean if you've got it, flaunt it. But I ain't giving up my Adidas for nobody.

"Since when have we become a trio?" my partner whispered as we entered the old building.

"Probably since Knight sided with us instead of him," I muttered back, aware that Schenke was following us.

"I've been wondering about that."

"Me, too." Louder, "Knight!"

"Up here," came the immediate reply.

Our flashlights soon found him coming down the stairs from the balcony. He threw up an arm to protect his eyes.

"Hey, fellas," he said, "have a heart. I'm on your side remember?"

We turned the lights away.

"Where's your flashlight?" Schenke asked.

Knight pulled it out of his pocket.

"I didn't think we all needed to be blind."

"Whatcha got there?" I asked, looking at the cloth in his other hand.

"We'll have to take it in to be sure. A boy was found on the beach yesterday. Two years old. He'd been dead about four days. There was a strip of cloth stuck to his ankle. I think it matches this."

"You didn't tell me that," Schenke accused.

"I told you about the boy and how he died. Why else did you think I wanted to come here? I remembered the rags when we were here before."

"Next time, fill me in, partner," the other man bristled.

"How did he die?" Hutch asked.

I could hear the reluctance in his voice. He didn't really want to know.

Part of the job.

Maybe Knight heard it, too.

"Blood loss," he said.

"His throat was cut," Schenke clarified.

Gee, thanks.

I realize we needed to know it, but did Schenke have to enjoy it so much?

"I don't suppose the kid was killed on the beach?" my partner asked.

"Nope," the other partner answered.

Here. It happened here.

"That doesn't mean it happened here," Schenke seemed to reply. "There's no proof."

"There *is* a cellar," Hutch got in.

"Where?" Knight got in.

"Somewhere off the women's rest-room."

The young detective nodded. We all headed for the lower stairway. All except Schenke.

"Come on, now," he called. "Let's just get the lab boys in here to check everything. It's procedure."

Knight didn't even break stride as he hustled down the wide stairway to the lounges. Hutch followed him. That left me to argue with the fourth man.

"We will call the lab," I said patiently. Well, not too patiently. "In fact, you can even call 'em yourself, if you want. In the meantime, it won't hurt to do a little investigatin' of our own."

"But you could be destroying evidence."

"What evidence? According to you, nothin' happened here--except the obvious in the back row."

"Just because you glory hounds are trying to make brownie points, it doesn't mean you can drag us along with you to clean up the mess."

"I didn't see any chains on Knight pullin' him anywhere," I countered. "You do what you want. We got detectin' to do."

I left in a hurry to catch up with the others. Behind me, Schenke moved off toward the front foyer, muttering all the way.

Nothing complimentary I was sure.

The descending steps broadened out to a wide hall that, in turn, led to wide doorways on either side. These were the ladies' and gentlemen's rooms. Even the stripped walls and graffiti couldn't dim entirely the elegance or the ornate style of a movie house made in the thirties.

And spacious.

I've seen entire families living in less area than those lounges, the rooms before you got to the business section with the toilets and sinks.

But which was the men's, and which was the ladies'? The signs for same were long since gone.

"Come on, Starsky. Stop sight-seeing," came Hutch's voice from the left.

So, off I went in that direction. I found them in the bathroom, rapping along a wall that evidently had once held a set of long, narrow mirrors.

"This the place?" I asked.

"According to the blueprint," the Blintz frowned.

I moved in beside him.

"What did you ever do," I said while trying to listen for a hollow panel, "to deserve a partner like Schenke?"

"Oh, he's all right," Knight said, as he knocked at the far end of the wall. "He's a good cop, really. Smart. And he usually knows when to follow procedure and when not. Usually. But he does like his evidence up front. No mumbo-jumbo."

"Good instincts can keep a cop alive," I said.

"And they've done the same for him," Knight agreed. "But you won't catch him admitting it."

"How long have you two been partnered?"

"Around three years."

"Since the Vampire Killings," said Hutch.

Huh? Evidently my partner had been doing more than a little homework.

"The Homeless Killings, please," the young detective corrected. "This town has a thing for vampires."

"This town," said my country boy, "has a thing for everything under the sun."

"Yeah," I agreed. "It makes life interesting, don't it?"

"There's nothing wrong with a little boredom, Starsky."

"True. But it's so bor-ring."

"I think I've got it," Hutch said, tracing a small crack that ran along one of the darker rectangles where a mirror had been.

I gave it a push with my partner. The panel moved but then caught on something."

"There must be a release around here some place."

We started searching, slowly moving away from the tiny crevasse. Knight stepped in between us and tried to look inside. He'd picked up a strip of metal from some place and was trying to wedge it into the crack. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him lean into the wall.

Something snapped.

The panel swung back to reveal nothing but darkness. Flashlight beams showed wood paneling and a ladder.

A not-very-solid-looking ladder.

I frowned.

"I'll flip you for who goes first," I said.

"I'll go," said Knight, moving into the doorway. "I'm probably lighter than the rest of you. Maybe I won't bounce as hard."

He *was* skinny.

"Don't forget your flashlight," Hutch said, as the other began to descend.

"Can't really use it on the ladder. Besides, I've got pretty good night vision."

He disappeared into the hole.

"He's a regular owl," Schenke said as he joined us.

"I heard that, Leon," Knight called up.

Leon?

"Good," his partner yelled back. "Then you can't say I'm talking behind your back." To us, "He'd make a great reporter. He's got the ears for it."

"Come on down," came Knight's voice. "But take it slow. This place isn't too far removed from a Paris sewer."

Hutch moved onto the ladder. The big blond was maybe the heaviest of us, and looked very much aware of it.

"Easy does it, huh?" I said softly.

"You do the same."

Still, I was uneasy even after I heard him call up that it was my turn.

"You want to go next?" I asked Schenke.

"Naw, you go ahead. I'll take up the rear guard," he grinned.

"Have it your way," I muttered.

And down I went.

I swear that ladder creaked and groaned louder than it had for the other two. The steadying hand on my arm was very reassuring when I finally reached the uneven floor, covered in garbage.

The place stank of dirt and human wastes. The flashlights didn't tell me any more than I knew already. No furniture, only rough paneled walls with a packed earthen floor.

And a door.

Knight was standing by it, peering into another darkened passageway.

"What now?"

Schenke again.

"You've got the seniority," the young detective shrugged, waving at Hutch and me.

Why did I get the feeling that Knight was willing to bow to our lead only as long as he got to come along?

"Okay," I answered the unspoken request. To our resident thorn-in-the-side I asked, "What about you?"

"What about me?" Schenke smirked.

I was beginning to think it was a permanent expression.

"After all, I'm witty, handsome, and unbelievably charming," the other went on.

Oh, brother.

I heard Hutch whisper right next to me, "What about housebroken?"

I kept my face straight somehow. But I happened to see Knight grinning in the shadows.

He had heard that?

"Fine," my partner spoke up. "You can stay here and keep watch."

"Oh, be still my heart," Schenke quipped.

"Sounds like a good idea to me," I said. "We wouldn't want anyone to have a heart attack, now would we? After you, gentlemen."

Knight darted through the opening. I went after him. Hutch brought up the rear, guarding my back.

Like always.

So, flashlights swinging, we made our way down a narrow hall. The steps Hutch had referred to seemed only to be some boards partly buried in the dirt.

All in all, I was getting awfully tired of the dark.

"Just be glad you're not a coal miner, Starsk."

Reading my mind again, Hutch?

"You couldn't pay me to work in a hole in the ground," I said aloud.

"That's why most miners do it, for the pay," said Mr. I-went-to-college.

"That and it's the only thing they know," came a voice from up ahead.

Knight.

Schenke was right. The guy had ears to put the *National Enquirer* to shame. And so far, he hadn't even made anything up.

Knight stopped.

"Sabat," he said.

Well, I could be wrong.

"You want to clarify that?" Hutch asked.

"I've been trying to remember what that smell was."

"I coulda told you without any problem at all," I said.

The young detective moved on in silence.

But my partner didn't give up so easily.

"What does a witch's sabbath have to do with all this?" he asked.

The passage gave way to another dark room.

"Watch your step," Knight said as he slipped to the side.

He shone his light over a slick, tiled floor of black and red.

"There's been a Black Mass here," he said.

"How do you know?" Hutch asked entering the room close behind me.

"That, for a start"

He swung his light without hesitation to a place on the near wall. It showed an inverted crucifix.

All our lights were moving now. There were several statues, amongst which was a painted, anatomically-correct Mary. There was also an altar with candlesticks, and bowls, and still more crosses, none of which looked too terribly clean.

There was no sign of life.

Over it all, the stench hung like a pall.

The objects might not have any special significance for me, but that "feeling" was very strong in this room.

It could have been the smell.

My mouth was getting dry from breathing through it rather than my nose. I was beginning to almost taste the fumes.

"What does all this have to do with the smell?" my partner asked.

Hutch. My poor Blintz.

His clean, orderly, WASP mentality resurrected itself now and again. It was usually when he had time to think about it. Otherwise, he was as nice a slob as anyone could meet. His car, for instance...

"Human...excrement," Knight was saying, breaking into my thoughts, "is often used as incense."

"Incense?" I sputtered.

So much for the "sweet incense" of my childhood.

"Look there," said the young detective, pointing to the ceiling. "This place might have electricity."

There were four spotlights, all red, two of which were aimed at the altar.

"We're probably under the next building by now," I said. "Maybe we can find a light switch and an air-conditioner."

I began to look.

"I wouldn't count on it. The smell is part of the service," Knight said.

"How do you know so much about it?" Hutch asked as he poked at a pile of something in a corner.

I didn't want to know.

"I had a friend," the other said as he seemed to be trying to follow the wiring to the spotlights, "who believed that all questions should be answered if

at all possible. And I, inadvertently, asked."

"Curiosity, huh?" I said as I peeked into an alcove.

"Not really. We were walking down a path that forked. We were headed one way, but I could hear sounds coming from the other. I asked about it, and a few months later, he took me there."

"To a Black Mass." Hutch shook his head.

See there? WASP mentality. Of course, us Jewish princes have no such hang-ups. But the place did *stink*!

"What did you think of it?" I asked.

Knight paused in his search. "It was...educational, I guess."

"How so?"

"All this is supposed to be the antithesis of a Catholic Mass. That is supposed to give glory to God, among other things. This is supposed to degrade God, to shame Him. But you watch the people having intercourse on the altar, or masturbating with crucifixes and you can't help but wonder who's degrading who."

Silence.

I could almost hear those blond wheels turning.

"What did your friend have to say about it?" he asked.

"That it was a 'prime example of mortal puerility'."

"...Puerile, maybe," I said. "But mortal?"

"He had his own unique way of looking at the world. There was humanity and then there was LaCroix." Knight finished with a wave of his hand.

"You did say 'was'?" my partner asked.

"...Yes."

Don't ask, Hutch, I thought. It sounded as if the sorrow was still too fresh. But the Blintz was silent, as might have been expected. He was the tactful member of this team.

The same could not be said of me.

"I guess he learned about mortality firsthand then," I blurted out.

Oh well, I did have an image to maintain.

I could feel my partner frowning, that cleft between his brows splitting his face.

"It's hard to think of him as being like anyone else, even now. He was the consummate teacher. If he didn't know the answer, he found it out. If he couldn't find it, it very likely didn't exist. ...You know, whoever did the wiring for this place did a real screwy job of it."

He was trying to change the subject.

Okay by me.

"The whole place is screwy," I mumbled. "All I want is a working light switch. Is that too much to ask?"

"Be careful how you touch the walls. It looks like there are some open-ended wires in them."

"Maybe they're fiber optics," Hutch offered. "For special effects?"

"Maybe," Knight conceded.

"Starsky, watch where you're sticking your nose, will you?"

"My nose is getting enough of a workout as it is, thank you," I said, with dignity. "*It* would have been just as happy to stay out in my car."

"Then you'd be walking around here without that hooter of yours? No thanks. I don't think I'm up to the shock. I've just about gotten used to your face as it is."

"Just for the record, you'd look pretty gruesome yourself, if... Hey, look there. I found it."

I homed in on the elusive gadget.

"Starsky, don't!"

It was Knight's voice, which I had every intention of ignoring. But Hutch wasn't that easy. The steel claws that were my partner's hands grabbed me and pushed me aside. I skidded across the floor a few feet before I could sit up and rub the punctures in my arms.

There had been a flash of light sometime during my inelegant travels. But I didn't see the cause.

The third member of our group turned away from the now ripped-out switch to hover over a heap of shadows and blond hair.

Hutch.

"Wha...What happened?" I stuttered as I crawled toward my partner.

"Booby trap, I think."

Knight was trying to straighten out the twisted body.

Not body. Hutch was alive. See? He was breathing and his eyes were open. I refused to acknowledge the shallow breaths and the unseeing gaze.

"Hutch?"

"You'd better go tell Schenke to call an ambulance," said the other, even while he listened to my partner's chest.

I gave the limp hand a pat, as I scrambled to my feet and ran. My flashlight wasn't very steady as I navigated the narrow hall.

"Schenke," I called. "Schenke!"

"Yo! Up here."

He had climbed back up to the rest-room.

"Get an ambulance. Tell 'em to use sirens and the whole bit. Electrocution, it looks like."

"But...," Schenke argued.

"Do it!!" I thundered.

"Yeah, yeah. Sure."

The voice was fading fast.

"And hurry!" I croaked after him.

If Hutch dies...

I don't remember the way back. I only remember thinking I had to be there in case Hutch...

He wasn't going to die!

He can't die.

Please. He can't die?

It took me several minutes, I think, to realize that Knight was talking. Who knows how long it took me to be aware of anything other than my partner and the clammy hand I held as if, not only his, but my, life depended on it.

"Hutch?" the young detective was calling softly. "Can you hear me?"

No response.

"Come on, Hutch. Talk to me."

Nothing.

I felt my own resentment mount. This intruder was trying to impose himself on our lives. Or possibly, our deaths.

It would be deaths.

If Hutch died, at least part of me would go with him.

I was about to tell the newcomer where to go in that hell I saw rapidly approaching, when I was surprised to hear:

"Starsky's here."

I brought up my flashlight to study Knight's face. His eyes were squeezed shut, his expression closed in concentration. One hand was only just brushing a pale temple.

"Starsky," he repeated in a strange voice. "...Yes. He's here, Hutch. ...He's waiting for you."

And Hutch?

His eyes still stared out into nothing. His respiration was still much too shallow.

"Yes," Nick seemed to smile.

What was so funny?

I would have slugged him then and there. But his next words stopped me.

"It's sad to see a man weep," the graveled, whispered voice went on.

Who was crying?

"Don't leave him, Hutch. You wouldn't want to be left."

My vision blurred. A shaky hand rubbed away some irritating water on my face.

Come on, Hutch.

Be all right.

"...Yes. That's the way..."

Did Nick actually speak those words? I was never sure, either then, or afterwards.

Hutch groaned.

His eyes blinked and then slowly closed. But the adrenalin really started pumping when his hand began to return the pressure I was exerting on it.

"I'm here, Hutch. You're gonna be fine. Just hang on to me."

"Yeah," or the slurred equivalent thereof, was the only reply, as he curled up next to me.

I was barely aware of Nick's movements. Only part of my brain registered what he said before he left us.

"I'll go keep watch with Schenke."

We were alone.

But not for long. Rattles of equipment and curses preceded the paramedics. Firm hands pried Hutch out of my arms. Then they led me out of the hole.

At the hospital, Hutch and I were both checked over. Somebody had gotten the idea that I was in shock.

What did they know?

I was released. But they decided to keep my partner for observation.

Who cares about observation?

Just keep him alive.

"Need a lift?"

It was Knight. Again.

"Uh, I have to get my car."

Where *was* my car?

Still in front of the old theater, I remembered.

"We can drop Schenke off. You're in no shape to drive."

"He's going to drive *my* car?"

Not in this lifetime.

"Oh, he's not so bad. He's even driven the Caddy once or twice," Nick smiled.

"Thanks a lot," came a muttered reply.

"For your information," I said clearly, "your Cadillac is *not* my Torino."

Schenke snorted.

"Be that as it may, either your car stays where it is, or Schenke takes it home. I'm not going to let you drive tonight," Knight said calmly.

"You and what police force?"

Blue eyes seemed to glitter for a minute.

"Right now, I'm all that needs to be here," came a whispered voice.

It must have been the light, or the fact I was pumped full of who-knows-what-drugs. Maybe it wasn't such a bad idea to let his partner drive.

"But not a scratch," I warned Schenke.

"Not even a wrinkle," he promised. "I'll treat her as if she was my own wife."

"Better."

"You got it," he swore.

"Let's get going," said Nick. "It's getting late."

A glance at my watch showed an unfocused five-something-or-other, A.M. it had to be.

I fell asleep on our way back. I roused enough to give Schenke my car keys. Then I had to stay awake enough to give Knight directions to my place.

"What did you do?" I asked him at last.

"I'm not really sure. It's a form of hypnotism, I think."

It sure beat acting like a chicken.

We were parked in front of my apartment. Schenke hadn't shown yet.

"Your friend teach you that?" I asked.

"Kind of. He used it on me once. I was in pretty bad shape myself. I've never tried it before. I'm just glad it worked."

"All three of us are glad."

A beautiful, red car pulled up. I gave my "baby" a quick look-over before I

took back the keys.
"Thanks," I said with as much grace as I could muster.
"Anytime," came the disgusting, cheerful reply.
"Take care of yourself, Starsky," Nick waved. "Hutch's going to be fine."
I stared, intelligently, of course, as he and Schenke drove away.
It was a long night, even if there was less than an hour left of it by the time I got to bed. The day was even longer, as I waited for Hutch to be released from the hospital.
I got him home and safely enthroned on the couch with a beer.
"Come on, Starsky. Relax, will you? We made it."
"Yeah, I know," I sighed, sinking down beside him with my own share of the brew.
"What's the matter? Didn't you get any sleep?"
"Actually, I did. My head hit the pillow, and about five hours later, I woke up."
"Well, that's good. Except you don't look like you got much rest out of it."
" 'Fraid not. ...Hutch, what did he do to you?"
Pale eyes closed briefly.
I wondered for a moment if he knew what I was talking about. Sometimes our mental shorthand got scrambled.
"I don't know, Starsky. I honestly don't know."
"He said it was like hypnotism."
"Maybe."
A font of information, my Blintz.
"Did you hear him talking to you?" I tried again.
He shook his head, "...I don't...think so."
"What did you hear then?"
"I don't think I heard much of anything. I couldn't see you, or hear you, or anything else. Just silent emptiness."
"You knew I was there, didn't you?"
"No," Hutch said sadly. "I was alone, and I didn't like it much. You know, Starsky, I think maybe that's the worst part about dying: being alone."
"Well, you ain't alone, Blondie. And don't you forget it. Not now. Not ever. Got that?"
"Got it," he smiled. "Now, all we have to do is convince the powers that be that we're both immortal."
"I'm doin' my share. You just make sure you keep up your end."
"I'll try."
"No," I said, falling easily into the roll. "'Either do. Or do not. There is no try.'"
Hutch gave me a very little bow.
"Yes, Master Yoda," he said.
"Remember that. Now, what happened?"
"There was a... Not a voice. Or at least not one I had ever heard before. Not even a sound really... But I remembered..."
"Remembered what?" I asked.
"You. What else? Then I was back with a splitting headache and you mangling my hand."
"Mangling, huh?"
"Believe me, that's still an improvement over oblivion."
"Whatever. I don't even care if it took those little, blond, guilt genes working overtime, as long as it got you back."
"Guilt? What have I got to feel guilty about?"
"How should I know? You're the only guy I know who can feel guilty about nothing at all. I know, what about the mess you keep dumpin' in my back seat?"
"Oh, that."
He had the audacity to shrug.
"What do you mean *that*?" I sputtered. "It's my car. I'm supposed to make my own messes."
"What about the case, Starsky?"

A cold dash of reality.

I wasn't ready for reality. In reality my partner had almost died.

"Did they find anything?" he persisted.

"I'll bet they found plenty. But you couldn't prove it by me. I've had other things on my mind. You want to go in and find out?"

I already knew the answer.

Sure enough. That's where we ended up. And since we were there, guess who got roped into doing the reports?

You got it.

"Serves us right, you know," I muttered as we headed back to my car. "We would've had to do it all eventually."

"I've got news for you: paperwork is always better off done tomorrow, rather than today."

"That's an interesting rewording of the saying, Starsk. But I wanted to know about the kid."

"Yeah. Well, we do have a suspect. In fact, we've got a bunch of 'em. And that hole's been unplugged and scrubbed out. That's probably going to take a month by itself. Which reminds me, next time you want me to stop doin' somethin', a simple 'Stop!' will do just fine."

"As I recall, you weren't listening."

"And throwing yourself into the breach was a reasonable alternative?"

"I slipped."

"Trippin' over those big, blond feet again, huh?"

"Yeah, well, nobody's..."

We were just getting inside my car.

"Hey, Hutchinson! Starsky!" came a voice.

We both turned to see a slender young man crossing the darkened parking lot.

Knight.

I felt strangely reluctant to talk to him.

Why?

No reason.

He'd maybe saved Hutch's life. I might not understand how, but death had been a too-real possibility.

Concentrate on that.

That and the fact my partner was alive.

That should be enough for anybody.

"Hi, Nick."

"How're you doing?" he smiled. "Both of you."

"Both?" I protested. "I'm not the one who was lightin' up the place like a Christmas tree."

"Ah, but who was trying to ground him?"

"Starsky?" Hutch asked.

"I did not! I was just makin' sure you weren't goin' anywhere."

"And where was I going?"

"You were dyin' on me, you, big, blond jerk!"

Knight laughed. "Well, I'm glad things are back to normal."

"...I, uh...want to...thank you," I stumbled out. "The Blintz ain't much, but he's the only partner I got."

"Who else would put up with you, I'd like to know?" Hutch said to me. Then to Nick, "And thanks for me, too."

"Glad to help. It was nice to be let into the circle even for a little while. I've got to run. I'm supposed to meet Schenke at the lab. Take care of yourselves."

"You do the same."

Knight turned toward a far corner of the lot. I saw nothing.

"There he is," said Nick. "I don't want him to catch me here. I'm already supposed to be there. Be seeing you."

He trotted off.

"Yeah," we called after him.

Sure enough, his partner came hustling across the parking lot like he had a

sticker in a sensitive place. He disappeared into the building. Then Knight appeared from behind some parked cars and went to his own unassuming, little "puddle-jumper", as my Aunt Rosie used to say.

"With hearing like that," Hutch said, "that guy would make one great bat."

"Bat nothin'. He'd make a terrific vam...pire..."

For some reason we just stared at each other.

"You know," I said slowly, "a vampire could be a real asset to the department."

My partner gave me one of his best Hutchinson looks.

"You're crazy, Starsky."

Told you so.

"Of course, I am," I said aloud. "I'm a cop, aren't I?"

"So say we all."

I started up the Torino and took us home.

- The End -

[Also by B.N. Fish: The LaCroix Chronicles, an account of Nick Knight's origins, to be published in Just My Type, a multi-media vampire fanzine coming from Mystery Frank, 726 Zorn Ave. #2, Louisville, KY 40206. Publication date late 1992. Some stories in Just My Type may contain same sex situations.]



CHOICES

by

B.N. Fish

I hate hospitals.

I don't guess you can expect a place that specializes in tile and disinfectant to be a barrel of laughs. But you'd think they'd have some spray or other that killed smells as well as germs. Let's face it, blood and vomit are not my favorite turn-ons, especially when they're mine. There's only one thing worse than me being in the hospital. That's Hutch being there.

Like now.

He was out of it, his face pale and withdrawn. He hadn't spoken at all since I had found him, collapsed on the front steps to my apartment.

"Come on, partner," I whispered. "Wake up and tell me who did this to you."

"When did it happen?" came a voice from close behind me.

Even while I was jumping out of my skin, I was reaching for my gun. The newcomer looked down the barrel with a remarkable calm.

"It hasn't been that long, Starsky," he said quietly.

It took only a moment to recognize the face: Det. Nick Knight from the night shift. I put away the hardware.

"Sorry about that," I said, not entirely repentant.

I looked to see if the fuss had woke up Hutch.

No such luck.

"How's he doing?" Nick asked.

"Well, they've got all the blood pumped back into him, at least."

"How much did he lose?"

"A little over a pint. Some time last night," I added, belatedly answering his first question.

Nick stepped up to the bed and seemed to study my oblivious partner.

"Just the one wound at his throat?" he asked.

"One wound, but broken open twice."

"And you don't know what happened?"

"Do you think I'd be sitting here if I had anything to go on?" I snapped.

"It's barely possible that you might drop by to see him, even if you were busy," the visitor shrugged. "He hasn't said anything then?"

"No. He's been unconscious or asleep."

But then Hutch began to move, rocking his head. Light blue eyes opened. But they weren't focused on anything.

"Hey, partner, how ya doin'?" I asked, touching his arm.

"...Starsky?"

"Who else?"

"...Did you...?"

"I haven't done much of nothing. What happened, Hutch?"

"...Miranda."

I couldn't place the name.

"She told me...her name was Miranda."

The words were ground out.

"Hey, it's all right," I soothed. "You're safe now. Relax, Hutch. We'll

get her."

Nick spoke. "Where did you meet her?"

What?

My partner seemed to echo my thought as he searched for and then found the intruder.

"...Who...?"

"You don't remember me?"

Pale eyes blinked.

My turn. "Can you tell us what happened?"

But Hutch was still staring at Nick.

"I know you," he said.

"Yes."

"But..."

What was going on? Something was upsetting him.

"...You're...one of them," Hutch said.

Them?

"Yes, I am."

"Starsky, run," my partner gasped, turning toward me. "Get out of here!"

He reached for me.

"No, Hutch. It's all right," I said, trying to push him back.

"Be still."

Nick again. There was an odd sound to his voice. I had heard it before.

"Be still," he repeated, touching my partner's shoulder. "Starsky's safe."

Thank you very much.

"I'm no threat."

And what was that supposed to mean? But at least Hutch calmed down. He sighed as he sank back onto the mattress.

"Okay," I whispered harshly. "What are you talking about?"

Nick shook his head.

"Then scram. He doesn't need this."

"Do you remember," Knight began, "a conversation you two had the last time we met?"

"We've had lots of conversations."

"This one was in your car, while I was headed back to mine. You were commenting on my hearing, I think it was."

"You heard that?"

"I heard."

"But you were a good hundred yards away," I protested.

"He said," Nick pointed to the man on the bed, "that I'd make a good bat. And you said..."

He waited for me to finish. He was going to wait a *long* time. I was *not* going to say it.

"And you said," he repeated, "that I'd make a good vampire. Remember?"

"You're crazy."

"Could be. But I'm not a bat."

He smiled.

I didn't.

I pointed to my partner, "He's delirious. What's your excuse?"

"There isn't one. I just am. And now, Hutch may be, too."

"You'd better leave, unless you want to take up a bed in this place."

"Starsky, there isn't time for this. You had doubts about me. You both did. Now, Hutch knows. Ask him."

"He's hurt. He doesn't know what he's saying."

"Hutch," Nick called.

To my surprise, my partner looked at him.

"What happened to you, Hutch?"

"...I...can't..."

"Did she tell you not to tell anyone?"

What was he talking about now? Imagine the shock when the Blond Blintz seemed to know.

"...I can tell...Starsky."
"Then tell him."
"Tell me what?" I demanded.
"No."
"She wants him, too," Nick said. "Doesn't she?"
But my partner just set his jaw with the old, familiar Hutchinson bull-headedness.
Great.
Now, he was not only delirious, but he was going to go through his stone-face act while he was at it.
Was that possible? Silent delirium?
I wasn't given a chance to think about it.
"She's going to call you soon," Nick was saying. "Are you supposed to bring Starsky with you?"
Silence.
Enough was enough.
"Get out," I said with some determination of my own. "You're only making it worse."
Knight nodded, surprisingly enough. "Watch him. I'll see you later."
Not if I can help it.
He started to leave.
Good.
"Nick?"
It was my partner. The unwelcome visitor returned to the bed.
"Will you...?" the patient began.
"I'll do what I can."
"And Starsky?"
"I'll try to protect him."
"Don't do me any favors," I hissed out.
Getting angry wasn't going to help Hutch, I told myself.
"It's not a favor," Nick said without looking at me. "Sleep now," to my partner. "Sleep."
Distracted blue eyes closed. And he slept.
I was still trying to pick my jaw up off the floor, even as I watched Nick leave the room.
No good-byes.
I didn't really want to consider that. I studied the face on the pillow. *Watch him,* Nick had said, as if I needed the request.
It *was* a request, wasn't it?
It was strange to see Hutch so weak and ashen. He was normally so disgustingly hale and hearty, in spite of all that health glop he ate...
No, I didn't want to get into that now.
What was really bugging me was that last exchange with Nick. Had Hutch really been asking him to protect me? I didn't need any protection. I only needed my partner.
Yet Knight seemed to understand whatever Hutch had meant. Just like he had before.
They were both crazy. Or at least, one of them was.
You have to admit, watching someone sleep isn't the most mentally stimulating activity in the world. It's especially true when you've spent a long day at work, worrying about said sleeper, and then getting answers (these were answers?) that didn't make any sense.
I fell asleep myself.
Not that I realized it, until I felt something trying to rattle my teeth. I woke to find a very, ordinary-looking hand at my shoulder.
Nick.
A quick glance at the bed found it empty.
"Where...?" I began.
"He's on his way down the stairs," I was informed.
I started for the door.

"Why didn't you stop him?" I snarled.

Okay, so snarling isn't accepted social behavior. But at the time, I was angry. It still was a vast improvement over blowing him away, which was my first impulse.

But the hand hadn't left my shoulder. And now, the joint seemed to be seriously considering letting the rest of my body go on without it. Something the majority of said body was reluctant to do. In pain, I still struggled.

"We have to find him," I said.

"We will. Come with me."

He released me. I, in turn, almost keeled over. Gasping, I scrambled after him. In the hall, he started off in the wrong direction.

"The elevator is this way," I said as I nursed my sore everything, it seemed.

"I know a quicker way down."

"You'd better be right," I said, trotting behind.

I had assumed he meant an express elevator. I was disgusted, and furious, to find him leading me out to an observation deck.

I was about to tell him so, in no uncertain terms, when I found myself staring down his pointing arm.

"Look."

Far below, a blond head was cutting through the parking lot.

"He's taking my car," I raged.

"He's trying to stop you from following."

And doing a bang-up job, as far as I could tell. How would I ever...?

The thought was interrupted by his hand snaking around my waist.

"Let's go."

I think some part of my brain just might have known what he was going to do. But the rest of me was hardly prepared when he pulled me over the ledge with him. Body and soul almost had cardiac arrest, in fact--even when we didn't fall.

By the time I had worked my heart back down my throat to the vicinity of my chest, I could vaguely hear him speaking over the pounding.

It was a nonsense litany of, "It's all right. You're safe."

I am?

And "You're not going to fall."

Why not, I'd like to know?

But I did know the answer to that one. He was what I had refused to call him. I still couldn't say it.

Hutch.

"Where is he?"

"There."

The vertigo was terrifying. But I saw the car speeding along.

"Hutch'll make a terrible Dracula," I said watching. "He hates heights almost as much as me."

"If that was all he had to worry about, things would be a lot easier."

Here we go again.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"After three bloodings he can be made into a vampire or a slave."

"A slave?"

"Like Dracula's Renfield."

That rogue part of my mind was picturing Hutch eating a cockroach. It was almost funny.

Almost.

"...In the movies, a vampire has to die first," I said softly, not really wanting to bring it up.

"He's not going to die, Starsky. She didn't go through all this to kill him. It's either immortality or bondage. Death doesn't enter into it either way."

"...So, what are we going to do?" I asked, hoping on the side that his arm wasn't getting tired.

"I don't know. I'll try to talk her out of it."

"Does that usually work?"

It never did with Christopher Lee.

"Unfortunately, no."
"Then what?"
"Then it'll have to be a more permanent solution."
"Kill her? You've got to be kiddin'. Can't we just get Hutch away from her?"
"Get him away, so he'll just go back to her when she calls him again?"
"Maybe he won't go."
"He will." Nick said with quiet conviction. "Just like now. Two more takings and he'll be sealed to her. Nothing short of death will ever free him. And it'll be a lot more than just bugs, Starsky."
Had he heard my thought?
I panicked.
Not a good idea when you're floating above the street, maybe seventy-five feet or so, with only a possible nut-case for support. But he acted as if this happened all the time.
Maybe it did.
How would I know?
I just might be finding out.
"Hutch'll do anything she tells him. That's up to, and including, killing you or any one else."
"No, he isn't a killer," I said.
"He'll have no choice. And would you care to speculate what'll happen to him if he even hurts you?"
Guilt. The word came immediately to mind. It was almost synonymous with my partner at times.
"He'd kill himself."
"You're assuming that she'd let him."
The car stopped.
So did we.
Let me rephrase that. Nick landed on the top of an unlighted billboard. My heart was doing its traveling act again, as I grabbed at his arm. He ignored my frantic hands, as he watched the blond head below us.
Concentrate on Hutch.
My partner had gotten out of the car and was leaning against the side.
Waiting?
"There," Nick pointed.
I could only see a dim shadow. But my partner obviously could see more. He stepped forward.
Did he stumble or was it just the strange perspective?
"He's still weak," I muttered.
"I'll put you down behind them. She may not find you. But she will me before long."
"What're you gonna do?"
"We'll see."
"You can't just kill her."
"No one ever 'just' kills a vampire, Starsky."
"But...," I protested.
He dropped me to the ground. He did make sure my feet were under me. But my knees had other ideas. I would have been just as happy to plant every part of my body on terra firma. I seriously considered kissing the pavement, but I was too busy watching Hutch embrace...a woman? Miranda? The darkness was too dense.
Nick had circled until Hutch and his...whatever were between us. I couldn't really see Knight either.
But I heard him.
It wasn't his normal voice. It wasn't even like the one he had used on Hutch those several months ago. This voice was colder. This one sounded like my partner when he was taking down the bad guys. I could only hear the tone to begin with. The words were lost in the distance.
"What do you want?" came a feminine voice.
Definitely a woman then.

A female... No, I still couldn't say it. Of course, how I could rationalize the little trip I had just taken, was something else.

"Him," Nick said.

"Go away," she ordered.

"Why have you taken him so hard?"

"Why do you care?"

"I know him."

"There wasn't any mark on him."

"Would it have mattered?"

"Not really," Miranda laughed.

That's when I knew Nick was right about her. That laugh. It had shards of cruelty in it. I've known ax-murderers with more warmth. And this woman had her claws in Hutch. My proud, bull-headed partner was meekly standing there with his arm still around her side.

I started looking for a weapon.

"Why him?," Nick asked.

I'd like to know that one myself.

"You said you know him. Then you know what he is."

"There's a lot of cops in the city."

"Not like this one."

Who else would dare try to be Kenneth Hutchinson, I'd like to know.

"Because of his partner then," Knight said.

Me?

"There are a lot of partners," she countered.

"Like these two?"

Nick was standing close to them now.

I hadn't been able to find a convenient wooden stake laying about. There wasn't any lumber at all. Not so much as a chopstick.

Guns aren't any good against vampires, you know.

There. I had said it.

It wasn't that difficult to believe, as I watched her stroking Hutch's throat. The Blond Blintz, on the other hand, looked as if all he wanted out of life was to be her midnight snack.

No.

If anyone had dibs on my partner, it was me, and not for, or as, lunch. She'd have to go through me to get him. Or was that what she had in mind?

"Nothing is indestructible," she was saying.

What had I missed?

I did find a pipe, a nice, heavy, length of whatever pipes were made of these days. It wouldn't kill a vampire. But it should slow her down.

"*You* want him, don't you?" she sneered at Nick.

"I want them both."

"Of course. If you have one, you have both, don't you?"

That's right. A package deal.

"They're entitled....," Knight began.

Hutch broke in unexpectedly, "Where's Starsky?"

Oh, no.

"Yes," said the woman. "I've been wondering..."

She began to turn toward me. Nick grabbed her wrist.

"No, deal with me," he said.

My partner struggled to free her. He was knocked off his feet when Miranda back-handed Nick.

"I *have* them both," she laughed, "as long as I have one."

Nick quickly recovered. Hutch was slower to get to his knees. Miranda pulled the blond up with ease. Then she buried her face into Hutch's neck, feeding.

NO!

Something propelled me toward them, something more than fear. I was as surprised as she was, almost, when I brought down the pipe, hard, on her right shoulder. When she turned on me, a lifetime of Bela Lugosi movies hadn't prepared

me for the horrific, altered face with the bloodied mouth. Before she could grab me, Nick had her wrapped in his arms.

The woman (woman?) struggled wildly, blood and spittle flying. I watched dazedly for a few moments, before realizing that Hutch was pawing weakly at Knight. He was trying to save the woman who was trying to kill him.

Two more times and he'll be sealed, Nick had said. What would one more time do?

Not now, I told myself as I tackled my partner to the ground. I literally sat on the weakened man, while I looked over at Nick and his "friend".

They were circling each other like opponents in a wrestling match. This fight was very real.

"Get him away, Starsky," Knight called to me, his main attention being on the the woman. "Take him home. I'll meet you there."

"No," said Miranda. "I will."

"Can't I help?" I asked.

The woman giggled.

"Take care of Hutch," he ordered sharply.

I still hesitated even while I hoisted my partner up on my shoulders in a fireman's carry.

"Go!" Nick snapped.

I went, or rather, I staggered. Hutch might be weak, but he still weighed a ton. I got him in the Torino, somehow. Before I drove off, I looked back at the combatants. They had taken to the air. They spun and hurled like dueling bats. Or at least like I imagined bats might look.

I gunned the engine.

The sweet little Torino took us home in record time.

"Starsky?"

I opened his door to find him staring at me. He looked like a lost, little boy. Judith Kaufman should see him now.

No, better not, I thought, as I took in the bloodied throat and shirt front. If she thought the plague was the ultimate threat, what would she make of this?

"You okay, Starsky?" Hutch asked.

"I'm just fine, Blintz," I said grimly. "And that's more than you can say."

I hauled him out on the sidewalk. He was wobbly as he looked around.

"I'm okay," he mumbled. "I have to..."

"You," I interrupted, "have to get up there and inside. And hopefully under your own power."

"But what about Miranda?"

"Nick's taking care of her. Come on."

I didn't want to think about the "hows" of that. I just hoped that it would be Nick and not the woman coming after us. Because she was right. As long as she had Hutch, she had me, one way or the other.

I didn't want to think about that either.

I got Hutch into the bathroom finally. I started cleaning and bandaging him up. He was jumpy.

Get him talking.

"Hutch, how did you know about Nick?"

"Huh?"

Typical Hutchinson eloquence.

"How did you know that Nick was like your...like Miranda."

"I don't know. We talked about him before," he shrugged.

Then he shuddered.

I ignored it.

"Yeah, but we weren't really serious. I wasn't, anyway. Were you?"

"No," he said wearily. "Not then."

"Come on, Hutch. We're going to be all right."

He shook his head, "She wants me to..."

"It doesn't matter what she wants," I cut in harshly. "You don't belong to her."

"I do, Starsky. You saw."

"I saw," I admitted. "But I also know that it's not over. Nick said she had to take you twice more. She only did it once more."

Only.

He wasn't listening to me. His head was cocked to something only he could hear. He started to rise from his less than elegant position on the toilet lid.

"No," I said, holding him down.

"She's calling me, Starsk. I have to go."

"I said, 'no.' I don't intend to let you anywhere near the 'lady'. We're going to stay right here and wait for Nick."

"And if he doesn't come?"

I took a breath. "We'll worry about it then. You wanna beer?"

"...No."

"Well, I do. Come on. I'll get you a sweat shirt or somethin'."

He waited calmly as I dug out and tossed him the shirt. But when he followed me out to the living room, he kept right on going. I caught him as he was opening the front door.

"She's calling me," he insisted.

"How?" I asked as I closed the door and directed him to the couch. "How is she calling you?"

After all, the day Hutchinson single-mindedness could stand up against Starsky ingenuity, I'd turn in my tongue.

Well, maybe.

"Do you hear her?" I went on. "In your head?"

"NO!" he groaned.

I don't know what I reacted to first: the word, his tone, or the fact that he had collapsed on the couch, sobbing. I knelt beside him, trying to calm the heaving shoulders.

"What is it, Hutch? Tell me."

"She's dead."

I jerked around to find Nick leaning against the door.

"Sorry," he said. "I didn't have time to knock."

He was holding his left arm tight against his body. But the most striking and painful looking thing about him was a series of red, blistering, welts on all the exposed skin of his right side.

"What happened to you?" I asked, not leaving my partner.

"The sun came up," he shrugged.

He crossed the room and closed the curtains.

So, some of the legends are true.

I put on a light.

"How is he?" he asked.

My partner had sagged into my arms and was silent.

"I wish I knew," I said.

"Hutch, look at me," Nick instructed.

It took more than a few moments for the Blintz to find his inquisitor. It occurred to me that regardless of the hold our "friendly" vampire might have on Hutch, he still was awful hard to look at with the open sores on his face and hand.

Nick gently touched the bandage at Hutch's throat. He nodded. Then he studied the eyes.

What did he see?

My partner spoke. "You killed her."

Knight shuddered. "Yes."

"How?"

I asked that one myself. It surprised all three of us, I think.

"I doubt you really want to know."

I frowned.

He could be right.

"Starsky's safe, at least," my partner sighed.

"Yes."

"What about me?" Hutch asked.

"Right now, you look pretty good. Your eyes are clear and so's your mind."
"His mind?" I asked.
"The body's not the only thing threatened. May I use your phone?"
"Huh?"
Okay, so eloquence is not my strong point either.
"Sure, go ahead," I said finally.
Nick nodded and went to the phone.
"What about Hutch?" I asked.
"Rest wouldn't be a bad idea," he said as he dialed. "...Hi," into the handset. "...Yes, I know. It's one of the reasons I'm checking in."
Pause.
"And then what?" I insisted. "Is it over?"
"No," said Hutch.
"No?" I questioned. "Do *you* know what's going on?"
"No," my exasperating partner said, quietly. "But it's not over. I wish I could be sure that it will ever be over."
"When you die," said Nick. "Maybe then."
"He's not going to die!" I growled at both of them.
Nick turned his attention back to the phone. So I concentrated on glaring at my partner.
"Take it easy, Starsky. I'm not planning to die. But I *am* tired."
"You want to stretch out on the bed?"
"I'll wait for him."
He nodded toward the man *(?)* on the phone.
I agreed and settled in beside him on the couch.
Nick hung up.
"I've asked Jack Farrel to come over," he said, turning back to us.
"The coroner."
"I need him."
"Can I help?" I asked.
"Not unless you have a stash of blood tucked away in your refrigerator."
"...No," I said slowly. "...Will Hutch...?"
"No. At the moment, he's as human as you."
"Except?" Hutch put in.
I glanced at him. The Blintz was so unreasonably calm. I was ready to climb the walls.
"Except," Nick sighed, as he sat in a chair opposite us, without touching the sides.
Vampire or not, the man was in pain.
"Except," he repeated, "you are stronger, and your senses are sharper."
"But not like yours?" my partner asked.
"No, not like mine. But a two year old could probably knock me flat, right now."
I looked at Hutch.
We were in agreement. Neither one of us was willing to test that statement.
"What else?" the Blintz asked.
"You want it all? Now?"
"Will it be any easier, later?"
"No. A decision will have to be made."
"What kind of decision?" I put in.
"As to whether or not he wants to become a vampire."
"I've got a choice?"
"There's always a choice. This one is on the order of the rock or the hard place, but it is a choice."
"Well, then," I said with a satisfaction I wasn't really sure of.
"What else?" Hutch insisted.
"...Right now, you're more mortal that not. You'll live longer. A hundred years, maybe a hundred twenty."
"But?"
"But," Nick conceded, "you are also a beacon. Any immortal who meets you,

any vampire who senses your presence, will know you're right on the brink."

"What brink?" I asked.

"One more blooding, and he'll be a slave to whoever takes him. Forever."

"Wait a minute," Hutch shook his head. "'Blooding'?"

"Taking blood. Believe me, there are a few other terms for it that you'd like even less."

Light blue eyes grimaced.

"And a slave?" he asked.

"Like what you felt before you went to her tonight, only worse. You were fighting it. There will be no resistance then, whether it includes theft, or murder, or walking naked down Rodeo Drive."

Some part of me pictured my bashful Blintz parading down the middle of the street. I almost grinned.

"Starsky," Hutch said softly.

"Huh?"

But he wasn't talking to me. I glanced at Nick, who was nodding.

"True," he said. "But in a way, he'll always be at risk, no matter what you do. That was true even before this happened."

"But as a vampire, I could protect him."

"You'd protect each other."

"Like always," I said.

"Like always," Hutch agreed. Then he shook his head. "I can't believe I'm seriously considering this."

Him and me both.

"You have to be aware of your possibilities," Knight said.

"Okay, so slavery is one," the blond said grimly. "What are the others?"

"That they make you one of the People."

"A vampire."

Hutch's lips curled with distaste.

"Yes."

"How?"

I was beginning to feel like a ping-pong ball, trying to read both faces at once.

"By giving you their blood to drink," Nick said softly.

My partner frowned. I felt my own face assume a similar expression.

"...Just how likely is that to happen?" Hutch asked finally. "For a stranger to make me a vampire rather than a slave, that is?"

"Not much. Like with everyone, it's easier to take than to give."

"Meaning that it's easier to take blood than to give it?"

"Yes."

"Is it that way with you?" I blurted out.

Nick sighed, "...Yes."

"Why is that?"

"Pain. The stories about vampire lovers have a certain basis in fact. It helps to endure the cutting your own flesh if it's for someone you care about."

"Have you done it?" I asked then.

"...Yes."

"What have you done?" Hutch asked. "Made a slave, or a vampire?"

"...Both."

The door bell buzzed.

I got to my feet. Reluctantly, I left the two of them staring at each other. I opened the door to find a slender, older man with thin hair and a black bag.

"I'm Dr. Farrel," he announced, looking inside.

"Sure. Come in."

I almost didn't get out of the way in time as he slipped past me. When I turned, I found him glaring down at our guest.

"You're a mess," the doctor greeted, as he examined the side of Nick's face.

"Don't worry, Jack," Nick smiled weakly. "It's not so bad."

"Of course not," the newcomer snapped. "You always call me in broad daylight saying you've had a 'little accident'. Heaven help us both if you ever have a big

one."

"I've known worse."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better? Where's the bathroom?"

It took a moment for me to realize that he was talking to me.

"Uh, through there." I pointed.

"Go," the doctor ordered Nick.

Knight obediently got to his feet and headed toward the bedroom door. Dr. Farrel followed and then looked back at Hutch and me.

"Look, I know my manners are atrocious. But first things, first. Okay?"

"Sure." I nodded dumbly.

My partner and I stared at each other and by mutual consent followed the other two. The doctor planted his patient on the ever-popular toilet lid, and began removing a somewhat tattered jacket and shirt. We stood in the doorway.

It was then that we finally saw that aside from the blisters, there were a series of vicious slashes across Nick's ribs.

"And just what got ahold of you?" the stranger asked as he examined the wounds.

"The lady had nails," the detective shrugged.

"Nails? How about talons. Just how...." the rest died down to indistinct mutterings.

"Dr. Farrel," Knight said, evidently trying to ignore his friend's mutterings about "terminal carelessness", "meet Detectives Starsky and Hutchinson."

"I think we have met," said the doc, not even looking up.

Not that I remembered. I glanced at Hutch to see his reaction and found him staring into the medicine cabinet mirror. I followed his gaze to find our four reflections there.

I must have been tired. It had been a long night. It took a good two minutes before it penetrated my brain that I could see Nick in the mirror.

One legend down. One legend up. Or was that three up? Let's see, there are vampires. They can fly. And...

My calculations were interrupted when Hutch jostled my arm.

What?

Look, he mouthed.

I put my attention back on our resident vampire. Nick was staring at the doctor's black bag. Farrel was busy cleaning the wounds.

Why the concentration? Surely Knight had some idea what was in it.

"Jack," Nick said. "You didn't go by my apartment, did you?"

"Nope. I didn't think I had time."

The Doctor opened the bag. He reached inside and produced a hamburger which he put into Nick's hand.

Well, I suppose it's an improvement over a rabbit.

"Can you eat that?" I asked.

Actually, he looked like he was about to lose his lunch. Did I really want to know what he had had for lunch?

No.

"Jack?" the "young" man questioned.

Just how old was he, anyway?

"You can do it," the doc said as he took out gauze and two pints of blood like they used in my favorite of all possible places, a hospital. "Two bites at least."

Nick pulled his gaze away from the bags and swallowed as he unwrapped the burger. He took a rather small bite and began gumming it without any enthusiasm. He reminded me of Hutch.

"Y'know, some guacamole'd do wonders for that," I offered kindly.

I was promptly rewarded for my generosity by seeing Knight turn even paler and then throw up in my sink.

Farrel only shook his head with sad patience.

"Don't you ever get tired of doing that?" he asked, patting the shuddering man on the shoulder.

"I will probably about the time you get tired of trying to feed me." Nick

smiled weakly.

"Don't count on it. Do you have a coffee cup I can borrow?"

This last was directed at me.

"Sure."

I get better with age.

I went to the kitchen, my partner coming along behind me.

"How are you doing?" I asked.

"Okay, I guess. Confused more than anything."

"I sure don't know why," I scoffed, pulling down a mug. "...Did you hear them? They sound like a comedy team."

"They sound like us, Starsk."

"Us? Naw. We're one of a kind, you and me," I said, heading back to the bathroom.

"I agree," Nick called out. "There's no one quite like you two. How could I stand by and just let someone destroy what you have?"

"Thank you, whatever your reasons," said Hutch.

Dr. Farrel was daubing the blood on ribs and the blistered hand and face.

"We were lucky," said Knight.

"Here," I said as I shoved the cup into the doc's hand.

"Thanks."

We watched as he poured the remaining baggie into the mug and gave it to Nick.

"Drink."

Nick looked as if he just put a live snake into his hand. He stared.

"Go on," Jack said. "It's old. The blood bank was going to dispose of it."

Still the other hesitated.

"Drink it, Nick. You can try the hamburger, sans guacamole, later."

Trembling, Knight brought the red liquid to his lips and drank. And drank. He drained the contents in one continuous gulp, savoring the last of it in his mouth a few extra moments before swallowing. The expression on his face was somewhere between agony and pleasure. When he finished, he put back his head and panted.

"Don't enjoy it too much," the doctor warned. "You go back on your diet tomorrow."

Nick nodded.

"Good," said Farrel, giving him a T-shirt out of the bag. "Now, what do you say, we move this little gathering to the living room?"

"Sounds good to me."

I led the peculiar procession out to couch and chairs.

"How are you feeling?" Knight asked my partner, as he sank into my easy chair.

"Good enough. You look better."

He did, too. The blisters had already disappeared. He still was red and blotchy looking. But the pain was gone from his movements.

"Do you still have questions?"

"Will I ever not have questions?"

"I always did."

"You're trying to reverse it," I said. "Why?"

"I miss seeing the sunrise."

"There's got to be more to it than that," said Hutch.

"Nick," the doctor prompted.

"...Loneliness, then. Possibly all the People are motivated by blood and loneliness. To see everything you know pass away. To have everyone you care for grow old and die. To never hold a woman in your arms without fearing for her life. It's the price of immortality. And very hard to appreciate unless you've been there."

Everyone you care for... I'd never have to worry about Hutch dying before me. But then *he'd* be alone.

No.

"Can what you're doing work for me?" my partner asked.

"Your situation isn't the same," Nick shook his head.
"Why? Because I'm not a full vampire?"
"Partly."
"But mostly because," Jack put in, "in the three years we've been working on it, Nick is still a long way from a human. It takes time."
"And that's something you don't have," Nick added. "You're vulnerable. I have my weaknesses," holding up his hand. "But I'm not a walking invitation to any immortal who sees me."
"Just how many of you are there?" I asked.
"We don't exactly overrun the city, but we *are* about. And it's not just the vampires who can detect you. It's also their vassals, in the same way you knew me."
Knight closed his eyes.
"You need to get some sleep," the doctor said, watching him.
"I'm all right, Jack. Don't worry. You see," to me and Hutch, "it's like having my own personal Jewish mother. It's been a long time since I inspired that in any one."
He smiled.
But Farrel frowned. "You're enough to give a Jewish mother fits."
"Oh, well, it keeps you busy and out of mischief, doesn't it?"
"How old are you?" Hutch asked.
"A hundred and sixty...." Nick tried to recall.
"Seven, in August," the doctor finished. "He has to go to bed, and I'm afraid he has to do it here."
"Yeah, I suppose so. Where do you...?"
"The couch will be fine."
"Uh, what about your earth or whatever?" I asked awkwardly.
Just how would you ask that delicately, I'd like to know?
"No," Knight shook his head. "I don't sleep in a coffin either."
There goes another one.
"You'll learn," said Nick.
I went to get a blanket and sheets.
"You should get some rest yourself," my guest told Hutch. "You both should. If you do go out, be sure to do it in the daylight. The People will be resting but their servants will not. You'll know them just as surely as they'll know you. Stay away from them. Don't try to reason with them. Their reasoning is with their masters. Listen to your instincts...and take care of Starsky."
Take care of Starsky, my left foot. Starsky is doing just fine, thank you. And from the sound of it, even if I wasn't, I'd still be a lot better off than my partner, who was being described like the tastiest anchovy pizza in six states.
Nick moved over to the makeshift bed. Hutch sat down on the coffee table in front of him. He frowned.
That was not always a good sign. Often it meant that those little, blond, grey-cells were getting him into trouble again. Hutch can think himself into more bottomless pits than anyone. Of course, he hadn't *thought* his way into this one.
"I think I may be making an assumption here," Hutch said.
Knight waited.
"Are you offering to make me a vampire, if that's what I decide?"
"Of course," I blurted out. "That's what he's been saying."
"No," my partner countered. "He hasn't actually *said* it."
"But..."
"I guess you're right," Nick said. "I haven't said. But I *am* offering."
"Why?"
"So, you'll have a choice, if it happens and when it happens."
"What do you get out of it?" I asked.
"Satisfaction," Nick smiled.
"What?"
"Of seeing you both survive."
"Why should you care?" Hutch asked.
"...We are...," Knight said slowly, "basically a very selfish bunch. For me,

it's very comforting to know your kind of friendship exists. It's very rare on either side of immortality."

Watch it. We're getting soapy here.

"And that's what Miranda wanted to destroy?" my partner asked quietly.

"Yes. 'How dare you, a pitiful mortal, have what so few of us have known.'"

"And you don't think we will survive unless I do choose to..."

Hutch was having trouble with the "word", too.

"Become immortal, then. No, I don't. Once the news gets out, it'll spread like wildfire. And someone will come for you. I can't *know* that. But I'd be willing to bet on it."

Hutch was silent.

I was not.

"What makes you doin' it any better than somebody else?" I asked, not very kindly.

It wasn't a kind conversation.

It was my partner, however, who answered me.

"Because another vampire probably won't give me a choice, Starsky."

"And being a vampire is still better than being a slave," said Knight.

"But won't there be some kind of link or somethin' between you?" I asked.

"Yes. But it is a very different kind of bond. Your will *will* be your own. I'd be more of a teacher than anything, if, for no other reason, than that while you'll drink of me, I won't of you."

"So, it'll be weaker," said Hutch.

"Right."

Knight leaned back on to the couch, his eyes drooping. The Blond Blintz got to his feet.

"You said 'teacher'," I said remembering. "Do you mean like that friend of yours? You said he was a teacher."

"LaCroix was my master, yes. But it won't be the same."

Hmm.

"You think I should do it," Hutch said abruptly.

Nick sighed, "I'm hardly in a position to be objective since I'm trying to go back myself, but...yes."

"And you?" my partner asked the doctor.

Farrel shook his head, "I don't like it either. But I have to agree with him."

Hutch took a deep breath, "Come on, Starsk. Let's get some air."

"Yeah," I agreed.

I glanced back when I got to the door. Nick was already asleep. Dr. Farrel was cleaning up. I stepped out into the sunshine.

The sunshine Hutch might never see again.

We spent most of the time just driving around the city in silence. Then we stopped to walk through a park.

"You're gonna do it, aren't ya?" I said.

"I don't know. There's a part of me standing off somewhere wondering when I lost my sense of reality."

"Nick is real enough, even without the bat wings. And so was Miranda."

Hutch nodded, "What about you, Starsky? Are you going to want to be friends with a member of the 'undead'?"

"You're my partner, Hutch. Always. No matter what you decide. You know that."

"...I know."

Somewhere along the line we went into a grocery store. I picked up some basics like Froot Loops and beer. I saw Hutch pick up, and then put back, some wheat germ and kelp. I thought about teasing him about it, but then thought better of it. He did get some whiskey though. We paid for everything and were heading through the parking lot toward the Torino.

My partner stopped.

"What's the matter?" I asked, suspecting that I already knew.

The Blintz looked puzzled more than anything.

"Come on, Hutch. Let's get on home."
"Yeah, I think so."
So, we got into the car and left. I stopped in front of my apartment.
"You ready?" I asked.
When he didn't answer, I looked at him. The low sun was glittering off his hair.
Never again.
He was staring out the window as if trying to memorize every detail of the street.
"Let's go, partner. It'll be dark soon," I said.
"Yeah."
We got out. We were both kind of slow getting inside. I found him watching me, of all things.
"Whatcha doin'?" I asked briskly. "You'd better be lookin' at your flowers and stuff. You'll be seein' me tomorrow, you know."
"But not like this. Not in the daylight, ever again."
"I'll have you know, I look just as good by moonlight," I said smugly.
Come on, Hutch. Smile for me?
Please?
"Yeah," he said abruptly. "Let's go."
He literally hustled me inside and shut the door.
"Is it them?" I asked.
"Someone's out there," my partner affirmed.
"The word is out," came Nick's voice behind us. "The wolves are gathering."
Now that was a happy thought.
Knight was totally recovered now. There was no sign of the doctor. Nick was folding the bed clothes.
"What if I just leave the city?" Hutch said. "Quit the force and just move to the mountains. I'd be removing the temptation. And without me, there'd be no threat to Starsky."
"You just try to go any place without me, Blintz," I gritted out, with no humor at all.
"Starsk, I can't ask you to..."
"Who's askin'? I'm tellin' you. You ain't goin' no place alone."
"All right then. We'll leave together," my partner conceded.
"Do you really think you can get far enough away in one day?" Knight asked. "Even if you take a plane, any town large enough to have an airport is big enough for some of the People to be there. You're also assuming you're going to survive tonight in the first place."
"And if I do it, they're just going to walk away?" Hutch scoffed.
"If I make you a vampire, there will be a lot less reason for them to stay."
"No guarantee, huh?" I muttered.
"None at all."
Comfort and consolation abounding here.
"What about Starsky?" my partner asked.
"What about him?"
"Will he be safe from *me*?"
"What?!" I squawked. "The day I have to worry about you hurtin' me, is the day I..."
"Could be the night," Hutch broke in, "that I turn into a vampire."
"I don't think so," said Nick.
See there?
"Think?" Hutch questioned. "I'd like something a little more definite to balance his life on, if you don't mind."
"There are no certainties, any more than there are guarantees. Starsky's part of your strength, part of your core. You'll protect him. He'll protect you."
Me and thee.
Like always.
My partner began to pace.

"You know, as choices go, this stinks."
"There's lot of that going around," Knight shrugged.
Thanks a lot.
Nick went to the window and looked out. Darkness had come.
"Anything?" I asked.
"No movement, anyway."
I watched Hutch take in enough air to bust his buttons.
"What do I do?" he asked loudly.
Now, Nick seemed to be the one who was reluctant. But he nodded.
"In the bedroom, I guess," he said.
"The bedroom?" I questioned.
"He'll sleep afterwards."
"Sleep?" Hutch's turn.
"Aren't you tired?"
"Not at this very minute, no."
"You will be." To me, "I need a sharp knife."
"...Yeah."
I glanced at Nick's hands. Another "fact" shot down. He didn't have enough nail to peel a grape much less cut...
What was he going to cut?
When I entered the bedroom, I found the two men just standing around. Knight was unbuttoning his shirt. I handed the knife to him.
"Uh...," I began. My mom never covered this situation in her etiquette lessons. "Do you want me to leave?"
"NO!"
The effect was in stereo as they both answered me.
"You're a part of this, too," said Nick.
Good.
I wasn't sure I could have left, anyway.
"Ready?" Nick asked Hutch.
"One more question."
"Go ahead."
"Would you do it again?"
Knight looked as if he had never considered it before, or perhaps, as if he hadn't thought of it in a long time. Finally, he nodded.
"Yes. God help me, but I think I probably would."
"...Will you tell us why, someday?"
"...Someday."
With that the opened his shirt. He directed Hutch to sit on the edge of the bed. With care, he drew the knife over his breast. There seemed to be a scar where he cut. When the blood was flowing freely, he leaned forward and took hold of the blond head. He then guided Hutch's mouth to the wound.
My partner pulled back. He glanced at me. Then for a meoment he seemed to be distracted by something outside.
Were they by the door now?
When I looked back, I saw Hutch touch his lips to the blood. He began to lick.
Nick trembled.
My partner tried to draw away. But the other held him fast.
"Drink," Nick whispered. "Deep. I'll tell you when to stop."
It seemed like the proverbial hours. It must have been less than minutes.
Hutch sagged.
I stepped forward. But Knight was already laying him in the bed. The blond reached for him, as the other stepped away.
"Starsky, come here."
"Me?" even as I moved closer.
"Lie down with him. Hold him."
I did. But I was more than a little pertubed by my partner's troubled expression through closed eyes.
"He wants *you*," I grumbled.

Would this change?

"He *needs* you...." Nick said. "He should sleep until tomorrow night. If he wakes before then, come and get me. I'll keep watch in the other room."

Hutch nuzzled his bloody mouth on my shirt.

Oh, well, it was dirty anyway.

I looked up to see Nick slowly leaving the room.

"Are *you* all right?" I called.

"Hopefully, we all are."

As I considered this choice bit of wisdom, I made myself comfortable as best I could. Weariness was catching up with me, at last. Long arms wrapped themselves around me, and Hutch rested his face on my chest.

Me and thee.

We slept.

- The End -

[Coming by B.N. Fish in GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS 2: How will Hutch cope with his changed circumstances?]



EXPIATION OF OLD GUILT

Five centuries of guilt--
can they be expiated by any act?
to be around blood, to smell its iron fragrance
is nothing less than exquisite torment,
yet I must stay, a healer
not a killer
and pay the price
for villagers that lived in fear,
for rows of enemies impaled, for a thousand
maids used then cast away like
empty, pretty seashells--
used to make me strong,
to make me live forever.

I deny the call of the blood
and shun my kind who will not follow;
I am not a dreamer, as my brother says,
a weak fool who denies what he is,
but one who sees change writ
like blood upon the moon,
and if we must weaken because
we no longer submit to the urges of the kill,
it will have to be duly accepted
as the price for bygone deeds--
and the price of the vampire's survival.

Janet P. Reedman


Peggy Spalding '92

BLACK DAWN

by

Laurie Keeper

It was a dream, the man known only as Stingray told himself. It couldn't be real. It was one of those killer dreams that haunted his sleep ever since the nightmare of Viet Nam.

But it didn't feel like a dream. Instead of thatched huts and mortar-pocked rice fields, he found himself in the nightmare realm of a moldering tomb. Rivulets of green algae slime trickled down the stone walls with a rain-like hiss. The air reeked with tremendous age and something "other"--something evil.

He focused on the grayish blob taking shape before him, as his eyes became accustomed to the gloomy moonlight filtering through the high, barred windows.

The shape became a tiny girl of about five or six years, wearing a tattered dress. She too reeked of ancient places and withered corpses.

As before, in countless other visions, she smiled at the handsome dreamer. "It has begun," she said cheerfully. Her dark eyes gleamed from a pale face framed by white-blond hair.

"You're telling me, I'm immortal?" The dark-haired man cleared the cobwebs from his mind with a shake of his head and rubbed the double puncture wounds on his neck. He glowered at the little "girl".

"Uh-huh," she nodded enthusiastically. "You're one of us now. A creature of the night." She giggled. "I was, y'know, hungry, and, well, you were asleep, and so I took a bite." A look of concern crossed her ingenuous face. "But don't worry. I'm pretty small. I don't drink much. You won't die. Not yet, anyway."

"You bit me on the neck and I didn't wake up?" Stingray shook his head in disbelief. Pulling his black leather jacket more tightly around his broad shoulders to fend off the unnatural chill, he awaited her answer.

The tiny girl flicked a pink tongue over her blood-stained canine teeth. "They're real sharp. Besides, Papa told me that we've got some kind of gunk in our spit that puts people to sleep and makes their blood flow better."

Ray's expression remained impassive as he digested this latest bit of information. The way she described herself sounded more like a mosquito than a vampire. He crouched down beside the little girl and reached over to smooth back her hair.

She batted his hand away with astounding speed and agility, sending him reeling across the floor of the poorly lit tomb.

"I wasn't going to hurt you!" he protested, quickly recovering his balance. It wasn't like him to be caught off guard. He'd underestimated the waif's abilities. It wouldn't happen again.

"You couldn't, if you tried," the angelic-looking child answered with a smirk. "Maybe after you've been a vampire for a hundred years, like me, you'll be stronger and faster than me. But not now." There was a note of triumph in her voice that belied her child-like appearance.

Again he shook his head. "This is ridiculous. You're not a hundred-year-old vampire and I'm not a vampire either. Now, who is your Papa and where can I find him?"

She smoothed the ruffled tatters of what looked like a baptismal dress.

"First, you better drink some wine. I bet you're thirsty."

Magician-like she produced a golden chalice from thin air and handed it to him. He was compelled by thirst to bring the goblet to his lips.

He spat out the vile-tasting contents as soon as the warm, thick, rusty mouthful hit his tongue. He glared at the child while a trickle of dark red blood ran down his chin.

"That was blood!" he blurted out angrily, mentally kicking himself for stating the obvious.

"Uh-huh," she giggled, "vampire blood." She abruptly turned away.

His anger turned to curiosity when she beckoned him to follow her. She led him to one of several caskets lying in stately rows on their pedestals. With a flourish, she gestured to one of the older coffins.

With disbelief and foreboding, Ray closed the gap to the ancient sepulchre and tried to open it. Even with his well-trained physique, he couldn't budge the heavy coffin lid.

The little girl calmly walked over, and with her tiny hands, lifted the dusty cover, as if it were made of papier mache instead of marble.

A fetid smell wafted from the wide open coffin. Inside lay the perfectly untainted corpse of an immaculately clothed gentlemen. Even in death, the man exuded a certain aura of power. Fighting the urge to retch, Ray bent closer to examine the corpse's pallid features in the inadequate light. There was something vaguely familiar about him.

And when the corpse opened its eyes, Ray found himself looking at a mirror image of himself...

*

He awoke with a start, rubbing the phantom pain at his throat, just over the carotid artery. He felt the panicked throb of his pulse, and willed his heart to be calm. Employing techniques once learned from a Tibetan monk, he finally succeeded in calming himself.

The man who went by the codename "Stingray" wasn't sure how he had become what he had become. But the appalling dream that awoke him night after night gave him an uneasy hint of the truth.

It had started with the insect bites on his neck; then the sleeplessness haunted by frightful visions. Gradually his eyes and skin had become more sensitive to sunlight, in fact, to light of any kind. His skin reddened and burned at the slightest exposure to the sun. He began to lose interest in any food, save rare meat. He became aware of strange cravings, but fought to continue living as he had lived -- using his espionage skills to help people in trouble. As always, he asked nothing in return but a favor.

For as long as he could, he covered himself in sunscreen and UV sunglasses. When he could no longer bear the daylight at all, he began sleeping from dawn to dusk and doing his work at night. He thought it was some rare disease and consulted specialists to find a cure. There was none.

He adapted to the new restrictions and continued for several months, cruising the night in the sleek black sports car--the '65 Corvette from which he borrowed his codename--until the change could no longer be denied.

*

The alleyway had the same nightmare quality that he remembered from his dream--the redolence of death and decay; the ghoulish quality of green and red neon light. He quietly closed the door of the black Stingray and slinked down the dark alley. Fear made him hesitate for only a moment in his pursuit of the teenaged killers who had been terrorizing his latest client. A moment was all it took.

The bullet struck him in the left chest, just above his heart. It slammed him back into the wall and he slid down the cold stone to the ground.

He knew he was dying, crumpled on his side, watching the receding feet of the

gang members who had killed him. Waves of pain and nausea washed over him as the blood pulsed from the hole in his shirt.

The wide pool of light from a street lamp faded with his dimming sight...

*

So this is what it's like to be dead, Ray mused as he arose from the alleyway. He stood in the cool, night air, awkwardly turning around. It felt like trying to learn how to walk all over again. It was a morbid curiosity that made him want to look back one last time at his own corpse.

His calm amusement turned to horror as he looked down on nothing but a quickly-congealing pool of blood. He collapsed to the ground, aware as he did so, of his own shadow rising to meet him.

He rose shakily to his feet and felt for the bullet hole in his chest. A small, puckered scar surrounded by dried blood was all that remained. It still hurt like the devil. As almost an afterthought, he searched for the pulse in his neck...and found none.

Screaming, he dropped to his knees to beg God and the saints for deliverance. The prayer strangled in his throat; his hand froze before he could complete the genuflection.

He moaned in realization. "She was right. The little girl in my dream was right. I can't be killed." But he wasn't yet willing to admit that he was a vampire. The tears that coursed down his ashen cheeks shone like droplets of blood in the neon light.

The red color and ferrous smell of the blood filled his consciousness, blotting out all other thoughts except the lust for vengeance. He began running, his long strides chewing up the pavement as he chased down the animals that had shot him.

In the midst of the bloodlust, he did not realize that the glowing footprints he followed were the result of his recently enhanced vision. If he had stopped to think about it, he would have known that the ability to see infrared radiation was not a human trait.

He ran effortlessly and tirelessly, only half aware that the glowing prints were becoming brighter. He became amazingly aware of every sound and scent as he rushed down the sidewalk. The people he passed didn't seem to notice him. It was as if he were invisible.

He followed the gang to an abandoned apartment building, slipping in through a loose board in a window. The words "Chosen Few" were spray-painted on the walls and ceilings. If he had been acting on intellect, he would have remembered this gang from their previous encounter. Would have remembered that he put the gang's leaders behind bars. Would have remembered to be cautious.

But he wasn't acting on intellect. He crashed into the room in the middle of a gang meeting.

The youth who was speaking froze in mid-boast about the "enemy" he had killed. Other boys reached for pistols, clubs and knives.

Ray simply dodged the bullets and thrown blades. With his highly tuned skills in martial arts, it was something that he had been able to do most of his adult life. Now, it was surprisingly easy. Although the projectiles tugged at his clothing, not one of them inflicted any damage.

He opened his mouth in a triumphant roar, his teeth gleaming in the lamplight. The boys scattered in terror from the bulletproof madman in their lair--all except one. Standing his ground, the gang leader confronted Ray with a switchblade.

Ray batted the murderer's arm aside, as the little girl had done in his dream. The sound of snapping bones reached through the red haze of his bloodlust. The dark-haired crime fighter grabbed the smug young murderer by the throat nearly crushing his larynx.

A momentary look of terrified understanding crossed the boy's face as Ray hovered over him like a human raptor "mantling" over it's helpless prey...

*

The writer looked at the pale, handsome man trembling before her and grinned. "Every time there's a full moon," she said, "the crazies come out of the woodwork."

"I don't blame you for thinking I'm crazy." Ray looked down at his toes. If he'd still been capable of blushing, his face would have been fiery red. "I'm beginning to think so, too."

"Look, Ray, or whatever your name is..." Jane Wheat, gothic novelist extraordinaire, started in a soothing voice, "there are no such things as vampires. I know it. The experts know it. I bet you know it too."

"Then what's wrong with me?" He spread his hands plaintively.

"I don't know. Have you been to see a doctor?"

"Dozens of them. They all say I'm anemic. I gave up on doctors. Besides, do you have any idea how hard it is to find a doctor who makes house calls at night?"

"Probably harder than finding a real vampire," she chuckled.

"I wish you'd take this a little more seriously." He glowered at the heavyset young woman and sprawled into a huge wingbacked chair. "I did you a favor. We had an agreement."

"'A favor for a favor.' Yes, I know. And I'm very glad you came along to rescue me in your sexy black Corvette. But Ray, just because I write fantasy best-sellers about vampires, doesn't mean I can help you with your problem. What I write isn't real."

"You once told me you were the world's expert on vampires. You've written non-fiction books on the subject."

"I have an overactive publicist. Those stories are all based on folklore and legends. There are a few documented cases of cannibal tribes that drink the blood of their enemies. A few nut cases with a mental condition that makes them crave the taste of blood. But no real vampires, other than the bat variety."

"I told you my symptoms," he persisted, tapping his ever-present sunglasses against his thigh. "What does it sound like to you?"

She shrugged. "It sounds like you're a vampire..."

"Hypothetically speaking, if I were a vampire, how would I get unvamped?"

"A stake through the heart?" she ventured.

He quickly ran his hand through his thick, black hair in frustration. "You're not helping."

"Before we go any farther," she laughed warmly, "you're going to have to prove to me that you're a vampire."

"Don't tempt me, Jane."

"I always fantasized about you nibbling on my neck, Ray."

Ray shook his head wearily. "What would your husband say?'

"Probably: 'Go for it!'" She pulled her sweater away from her throat enticingly.

In less than a heartbeat, he was on her. She never saw him move. He had been over there, in the wingback, on the other side of the room, and now he was here, his cool breath making goose flesh of her neck.

His canines weren't exactly longer. It was more like his pale lips and gums had shrunken away from his teeth, making them appear to have grown.

There was a strange reddish glint in his large brown eyes; but she could no more scream than she could turn away.

For only a moment they stood frozen, his sensuous mouth poised above her neck. She blinked once. And just as suddenly as he had moved toward her, he was gone. She twirled around once to see where he was in her antique-crammed sitting room. He had disappeared.

Her voice chirped in her throat at a tap on her shoulder. Ray was standing right behind her.

"Dear God!" she shouted, watching him cringe back at her words. "Are you really a vampire?"

He dropped back into the chair and sighed. "Hell, I don't know. I seem to

have survived and recovered from a mortal gunshot wound in a matter of hours. There isn't even a scar any more. I can move around without people seeing me. And I crave blood...there is that."

"Except for the blood part, it sounds like you're some kind of super-ninja..." she mused. "I would think that would be an advantage in your line of work."

"Do you think I want to be this way for eternity? This is a living nightmare!"

"I guess immortality would be a drag for someone with a death wish like you." The writer mulled over the situation silently for a few minutes.

The ex-intelligence agent shrugged off her incisive comment and sat patiently, waiting for her to continue.

"From what I know about fictional vampires," she said finally, "you can't get vamped just by being bit. You must drink the blood of the vampire that bit you."

"I think I did."

"You 'think'? You mean you don't know?"

"The little girl handed me a goblet of something to drink. She said it was wine, but it tasted like blood."

"You know what blood tastes like?"

"Don't you? Don't tell me you never go to the dentist?"

Jane smiled sheepishly. "Not if I can help it... But getting back to you. Even if you got bit, and drank the vampire's blood, you should still be okay."

"Why is that?"

"You said you crave blood, but you're not a real vampire until you drink the blood of your first human kill."

"If you tell me any more good news, I'll die of happiness," he remarked bitterly.

"You actually killed someone and drank their blood," she said, her eyes widening in respectful wonder.

"I'm not really sure," he answered quickly. "I wasn't thinking very rationally at the time. He had a knife. If I did kill him, it was self-defense." When he saw this wasn't going over very well, he continued. "Besides, he was the little shit that shot me."

"I don't know what to say," she whispered.

"You could start by telling me how to get rid of this curse."

"Okay. Okay. Most of what I know is how to repel or kill vampires. You know, holy water, garlic, silver, the cross, stake through the heart...that sort of stuff."

"It may come to that," he sadly confessed.

"Let's hope not. But to get rid of the curse... Let's see..." She pulled a heavy leather-bound tome from a crowded shelf. Dust flurried around in the glow of a Tiffany lamp as she opened the huge book on her desk. After a few minutes perusal, she went on. "It says here you can cure a vampire by killing the vampire that made him."

"You mean by killing that little girl?"

"She isn't a little girl, Ray, if what you told me is true. She's a creature of the undead. She's evil. She'll kill over and over again for centuries and no one will believe that a pint-sized, Shirley Temple vampire really exists."

"And what about her 'papa'?"

"You may have to kill him, too."

"Does that book offer any less blood-thirsty options?"

"No, but I have a theory of my own..." she paused dramatically. "I've been dying to try it out on a real live vampire."

"What kind of theory," he asked cautiously.

She plopped down behind her desk and frowned. "I have no idea if it will work."

"What will work?" he demanded.

"For years, I was taking allergy shots to build up my tolerance for all sorts of things: ragweed, dust, pollen, dust mites, cats, bees. After a while, my body got used to the things I was allergic to. I haven't had to take the shots since

1985."

"Cut to the chase, Jane. I've got to crawl back into my hole before dawn."

"Okay. Okay. My point is, if we can find out all the things that you can't tolerate and expose you to increasing amounts of them -- starting with really small doses -- maybe we can cure you, like my doctor cured my allergies.

He nodded thoughtfully. "All right. I'll buy that. When do we start?"

"Right now. I'm going to stick you under a sun lamp, while I go get some holy water."

"Okay." He watched with trepidation while she set up the lamp. "You better pick up some Solarcaine while you're out."

"Why?"

"Because, if this doesn't work, I'm going to have one hell of a sunburn."

*

When she returned from her parish, Ray was squirming uncomfortably under the UV light. She took a moment to admire his shirtless torso before switching off the lamp.

"That's probably enough for a start," she announced in her best bedside voice. "Next we'll try the holy water."

"You planning to sprinkle it all over my sun-bronzed body," he quipped, noticing her admiring gaze.

"Nope. My husband has diabetes. But he's on a portable insulin pump. He still has a few disposable syringes." She showed him the small syringe filled with holy water.

"I hate needles," he pouted.

"Not to worry. Richard always said I had a velvet touch... But I'm a little out of practice."

"I should have known," he groaned, as he watched her swab his arm with a clammy alcohol wipe. He winced a little as she jabbed the needle into his upper arm. "Ouch."

"Stop being such a baby, Ray. That wasn't so bad."

He looked up at her in admiration. "You're in the wrong profession, Jane. I barely..."

The first wave of acid-like fire coursed through his veins, rendering him incapable of speech. His face blanched even further, as he collapsed back on the sofa.

Jane bit her knuckles in alarm as she watched his convulsions begin.

"Please, god, let this work," she whispered in prayer.

*

It worked, but not exactly as planned. The change was gradual, but after about seven months, Ray was again able to tolerate sunlight. He still needed sunglasses even in heavy overcast, and he had a tendency to tan very quickly.

He noticed other changes. He lost some of the inhuman strength he had gained as a vampire, but not all of it. The uncanny speed had stayed with him as well. His senses seemed more acute, his balance better, his stamina longer. But he lost the craving for blood and raw meat. And the bloodlust had disappeared, except when he needed it to survive.

His success rate with his clients improved, as his life became as close to normal as his life could ever be. The nightmares persisted; in fact, became worse. Usually he awoke just when Angela--as he called her--beckoned him forward to look in the malodorous coffin.

He heard her calling him...calling him...

*

He snapped awake in eerily familiar surroundings. He was in a tomb, like but unlike the one is his nightmares. This one was newer, probably late forties--a

Hollywood version of a tomb. Row upon neat row of square marble plaques surrounded him, each with its own stanchion for flowers. He spun around in claustrophobic panic, seeking an exit.

The tiny "girl" was standing in front of him when he completed his circle.

"I have been calling you, Ray," she whispered seductively. "Why didn't you come?"

The situation was so unreal that he thought he might be dreaming. He didn't remember coming to this place, didn't remember dressing all in black, didn't remember anything. His terror increased, but he was accustomed to being in control of himself and his emotions. Pushing the panic down in his throat, he inhaled deeply and calmed his breathing.

"I'm not one of you any more," he finally answered. "I'm free of the curse."

"That isn't possible." Her small features screwed up in confusion. "Papa said the curse only ends when we die."

He reached out his large hands for her small ones. "Let me help you, Angela. Maybe the treatment will work for you, too."

"It's too late for me," she sobbed, burying her face against his legs. "I'm the only one left. I'm lonely. That's why I made you."

"What about your Papa?" he asked gently.

"Dust. They're all dust. I'm the last one."

"At least we could try to help you," he offered desperately.

"You know how you could really help?" she looked up at him hopefully. "You could end my loneliness."

"I can't be a vampire, Angela. I can't be evil. I've spent the last fifteen years trying to atone for the bad things I did before."

She pushed away from him in anger. "Are you saying I'm evil? I'm not evil. Is the man-eating tiger evil. No! It's in his nature to kill. I didn't ask for this. I didn't ask to be a vampire. I was a good little girl!"

His voice was soothing when he spoke again. "I'm sure you were, Angela. But now I can't let you go on killing people."

"I know that. I'm tired of killing. I try to kill only the bad people, but sometimes I'm wrong. I just want it to be over. That's how you can help me, Ray. You can kill me."

"I can't do that." His dark eyes were shrouded in pain.

"It's the only way that you'll ever be really free. You're still a vampire, it's just in remission." Performing her magic trick once again, she produced a large wooden stake and a mallet. "It's the same one I used on Papa when he asked me," she explained.

As she handed the tools to Ray, the sharp point of the stick drew a bloody line on his palm. Hardly noticing him, Angela turned to slide open one of the drawer-like crypts. Foul-smelling ashes covered the satin lining of the drawer. There was a small hole in the satin, as though a sharp object had been driven through it.

The girl climbed inside the drawer, so that only her head and shoulders were exposed. She looked up at Ray expectantly. "Do you think I'll go to heaven?" she asked.

He was too overcome to answer, so he nodded slightly and moved to her side. He kissed her cool forehead gently and breathed, "Good night, Angela."

She died with a smile on her lips and a grateful sigh. Within seconds all that was left was dust and the wooden stake. And a faint scent of lilacs.

As Ray turned his back on the dreadful place, he saw that the blood from his hand was flowing as freely as his salt-water tears. He walked out into the dawn and prayed for two souls to find peace.

- End -

[Author's note: Stingray" was a short-lived NBC series that appeared off and on from 1985 to 1987. Nick Mancuso, a handsome, dark-haired, very physical Italian-Canadian played the title role. During the course of 23 episodes and a pilot we found out very little about the character's past. We knew he was a Viet Nam veteran haunted by dreams. We knew that he performed risky "favors" for strangers and asked only a favor in return. We never learned Ray's real identity: he might have been active in military intelligence or the Central Intelligence Agency. He was presented as a "karate" expert (Mr. Mancuso has trained in aikido) and a chameleon-like master of disguise. We knew Ray had an almost supernatural habit of disappearing into the shadows when he didn't want to be seen (some of the fans theorize that he had a transporter built into his sunglasses, but I digress). We saw him dodge bullets, yet take a bullet rather than let someone else get shot. At the end of each episode, he would drive off in his black Corvette Stingray and both he and the car would disappear from the TV screen. In short, Stingray was full of mystery. Perhaps that is why the series was so intriguing.

P.S. If you're still having trouble getting into this character, think of him this way: a Lone Ranger (sans Tonto) for the 'eighties, driving a black Corvette instead of riding a white horse.]



MOONDANCE

by

Lyle MacDougall

Except for the animals who run away from us, the night is calm. The stars silently twinkle to themselves, and the moon shines down upon us like a great beacon. The woods are filled with all the colors of green, and the moonlight, along with the shadows it creates, paints new pigments of green.

Though the forest seems at peace with me, I am not at peace with it right now. I've been walking through the forest with the Old One for two hours, and I am exhausted. My leg muscles were hurting before, but now they're getting stiff, and I fear that I won't be able to walk much longer. I know, it's supposed to be an honor to follow an Old One to his final resting place, but this is costing me. I look to the sky, and see that it's a very blackened blue. He, at least, has enough time to reach his destination.

As we walk on, he continues to talk, not even bothering to look back at me, as I continue to follow him, and write down everything he says. He talks about the beginnings of the village, what he had to do with it, and then his personal life after. Much I've heard before, but I can still be surprised at times. Though I've known him for a very long time, and we've been very good friends, I realize there's another reason he chose me: because I am the village storyteller. There are many things I could've been. I could have been a hunter, and catch animals, which give blood to the community. I could have been a seer, who watches for strangers, and scares them away. I could have been a tailor, who takes the empty husks the hunters give them, and make them into our clothing. But, I always found the storyteller's job the easiest. All one must do is create stories, write down histories of the village, and, if anyone wants to tell a story, I listen to them, and write down what is said. It was an easy job until today.

When he stops talking for a second, I ask, "How far have we gone?"

"Twenty miles."

"How much farther do we have to go?"

"Twenty miles."

"Twenty more?" I moan, and he turns his head to look at me.

His face has an infinite number of wrinkles in it, but even more appear as he smiles at me. He doesn't say a word; he just looks at me with that smile, his pink eyes making that smile seem more gentle than I believe it's supposed to.

"My legs are aching, my heart's beating too fast, I'm having trouble breathing..."

"We can rest for a minute."

We sit on a large, gray rock, side by side, and I ask, "Why don't we turn into bats? We'd get there more quickly."

"No."

"Okay, I have a better idea. We turn into fog, and let the wind push us the rest of the way."

"No."

"At least let us turn into wolves, so my legs won't ache so much."

"It is time to go."

"You're ignoring me."

"Exactly. Let's go," he says, as he stands up.

"My legs are stiff."

As he turns his back to me to go on, he states, "They'll get less stiff if we move on. Let's go."

I yell, "You're supposed to be old, how come you're not tired?"

He turns to look at me, and he is different. His hair is solid black, and his face is smooth. The indigo robe he wears, which is unlike anything our tailors could make, is now rippling with muscles.

"How can you do that?" I ask.

"You can do it, if you want."

"Yes, but, why stay old?"

"Because it comforts the young, and it suits me."

His face and body melt back into the mask of old age, and he says, "I tell you this, and I chose you as my companion today, because I know you do not like to be comforted."

He turns, and walks in his original path, with a small laugh in his throat. I stand up, and continue to follow him. I feel somewhat baffled at what he said, and wonder if we were having the same conversation.

"Now, where was I before I stopped? Oh, yes."

He goes on with his life story, as I write it down. Amazingly, my legs do stop stiffening, and the pain does subside a little. Still, the pain is there, and is a reminder that I really don't like this, and I don't have to be here.

Still, I stay quiet as we walk on, until, after an hour, we are standing next to a very high hill, and I realize, in my breathless state, that we've reached twenty miles.

"So this is where we stay?" I ask.

"No, now we climb the hill."

"Okay, so we'll turn into bats and fly up," I say, hoping to get that by him.

"No."

"Come on, why are you putting me through this?"

He stares straight into my eyes, looking very disappointed, and answers, "Because you were born a vampire, you may change into a human. You should get used to doing it, because there are many pleasures in being human."

"Pleasures in being human? Forget it."

"You just say that because, being born in a village of vampires, you've never seen a human. Things may change soon."

We begin to climb. The hill is rocky, muddy, slippery, and a lot of other disgusting things. And, all those disgusting things get between my fingernails and onto my deerskin shirt and pants. We are halfway up, when I note that the edge of the landscape is getting brighter.

"The sun seems to be going up. I think we ought to hurry up and turn into bats, or we won't make it."

"You're bats."

"Why? Because I like my vampireness?"

He laughs, and says, "I know I didn't, at first. I started as a human, and was changed into a vampire through a bite on the neck. I didn't want to be a vampire, and that's why I have my weakness for sunlight."

"You told me how you helped make our village. What was the place you left like?"

"I'm not very proud of that part of my past, but I'll tell you."

He tells me of a world which sounds equally marvelous and horrifying. He can't totally explain it to me, so he uses images I'm familiar with. He tells me of a place with ten times as many people as are in the village, where impossibly large buildings are made of glass, and the humans, unable to turn into bats or wolves, created machines which fly or run fast. He tells me how this place of wonders seemed to bring out the worst in humans, causing them to steal, murder and sell themselves. And, it especially brought out the worst in vampires, who would see the humans a little more than lesser animals that fed their hunger.

When he finishes, we are on top of the hill, and he sits, with legs crossed, on a flat surface. I stand on the edge of the hill, and examine the view. From here, I can see only the tops of the trees, as they are being painted light green

by the sun that will soon rise over th horizon. Our village is so small, it is swallowed up by the trees.

The Old One laughs, and says, "I wish you could see the world as I do. It is as though there were never cities."

His smile grows as the sun's forehead edges over the tree tops, and anger starts to well within me.

I turn to him, and yell, "Why do you want to die?"

"It isn't that I want to die, I just don't want to live."

"That doesn't make sense."

"Because you're young. When you grow old, one fact becomes obvious. Nothing ever really dies."

The sun quickly rises, and the wrinkles on the Old One's face blow away in the wind. Next, all features blow away, and then his entire body, until there is nothing left where he once sat.

I stare at the empty space for quite a while, having a hundred feelings hit me at once, but none telling me to cry. I expected to cry.

I pry my eyes away, and walk towards the edge of the hill, and leap off. I turn into a bat, and fly away.

This is why I love being a vampire, because of the feeling of being so much a part of nature, as you flap your wings to go higher and higher above the sky. I stop flapping my wings, and hold them open, to allow myself to glide slowly downward.

When I'm an inch away from the treetops, I angle my body upwards to catch an updraft I knew would be there, and am pulled up. I make two loops, simply because I can, and fly straight, faster than any bat, until I reach the village.

In the center of the village is a large, stone building, home of the Old Ones: those who created the village, and who sleep inside wooden boxes during the daylight. The large building is surrounded by smaller wooden cabins, the homes of the young ones. I see children running and playing between the cabins, but I don't see adults. There must be trouble. Near the left edge of the village, there is a red building, which is made of a substance called brick. I turn back into a vampire at the front door.

This building has many purposes. On certain days, it is used to teach the children. On certain nights, it is used to pray to our God. Now, I fear it is being used as a meeting hall, to discuss an emergency.

As I open the door, I see all the adults sitting in the pews, and looking intently on our leader, Timon. He is floating above the stage floor, in hopes of seeing everyone's face.

Timon wears a red outfit the Old Ones gave him, which they call a suit. It looks rather ridiculous, especially the yellow cloth which hangs around his neck, and serves no useful purpose. His hair is always in disarray, and his nose is much too red for his face. His body resembles a sack filled with feathers. Still, I always felt this was his strength as a leader: his ability to be imperfect.

As he spots me, a look of sadness melts over his face, causing the crowd to look in my direction.

"How did it go?" he asks.

"He's dead," I answer, and fear I sound callous.

Still, no one judges me; they all bring their heads down in reflection. The death of a vampire is always a mixed tragedy in our community. For, though a vampire dies, it also means that a young couple will be allowed to have a child.

After a moment of silence, Timon looks to me, and says, "We're in the middle of a crisis. Can you please sit down, and listen?"

I look across the pews, and see that all are with their own occupation. In the front right are the seers, those who have raised their senses to such a level they can tell when a stranger is coming towards the community, and send disturbing images to the stranger, to scare it away. In the front left are the hunters, who capture the animals that give us the blood we live on, and also kill strangers who will not be scared away. If this crisis involves these two groups, it must be serious. I sit with the housekeepers, because my only other choice is sitting alone.

After I do, Timon says, "The leader of the seers wishes to speak.

Immediately, Clytemestra stands up. She is a tall, thin woman with perfect white skin. Her long, raven-black hair reaches down to her rounded hips. I admit to knowing her intimately, since we had once been lovers. Though I cared for her, it was difficult maintaining the relationship, when she was always able to sense what I was going to do, before I did.

"We have sensed a human coming closer," she states, "and it still persists on coming, even after our constant warnings."

What she meant to say was "threats", but the seers do like to believe they're civilized. In truth, their senses are so strong that they'd be too emotionally erratic to be hunters.

Galen, leader of the hunters, leaps up, and shouts, "I say we should kill the human!" And, the hunters cheer him on.

Galen grins at the cheering, as his eyes glow bright red. He's a huge man, the size of a bear, and I recall the Old One saying that he reminded him of a football player, whatever that was. Still, he's not as impetuous as he seems. He can't be, to be a hunter. For a hunter is one who must learn to kill without giving in to the blood lust. Because they can control it, they can admit it exists, and let out emotions as they are now. Most of us find this ability not only refreshing, but enviable.

Timon raises his arm, and the hunters instantly quiet, as Galen sits down.

Timon turns to Clytemestra, and asks, "Is this human an immediate threat?"

"No," she answers, "It is a female human with no apparent weapons, and she seems totally blind to our warnings, and our existence."

"Okay, so we may be able to handle the situation peacefully. I wish for a volunteer to go there, and convince her to go away from the village. But, I do not want it to be a hunter or a seer, since it's too obvious that they are too personally involved in this situation."

The entire hall becomes quiet, for a very good reason: nobody wants to do it. We all remember, about twenty years ago, when a similar crisis happened. A vampire volunteered to push a human away, but, at meeting the human, was overwhelmed by her blood lust, and drained the human of all its blood. After, she began draining all the animals she could find for all their blood, and, once she entered the village, began to attack our people. It was Galen who finally had to kill her, and I still recall how disturbed he was by this. We all fear this will happen to us, because we all recognize our own blood lust.

Timon watches the quiet crowd, and, in a low voice, says, "I understand your fears, because I also have them. But, one of us must go. Or, if she enters our village, we will all be victims to our blood lust."

Still, there is quiet.

"Okay, if I cannot get a volunteer, I must use the wisdom of..." And, his hand reaches into an inside pocket of the red coat, to reveal, "...the magic potato."

This gives us all a much needed laugh.

"I shall throw the potato into the air, and whoever it falls upon, must go to the human. As you know, this is not a real potato, but made of a substance which bounces. Thus, it is possible that the magic potato will bounce back to me."

You have to appreciate his sense of justice. He closes his eyes, and throws the potato straight into the air. Suddenly, as he releases it, he loses his balance, or trips over an air molecule, and spins around in circles. He goes so fast that he creates a breeze, which pushes the seers' and hunters' hair back. Eventually, he makes backward circles with his arms, which slows down his speed, and, eventually, steadies him back to his original position. I am so enthralled by this, that I don't notice, until now, that the magic potato is lying in my lap.

"No," I say, in a voice too low to be heard.

"No," I yell, as I grab the magic potato, and stand up.

"No," I scream, as I march towards Timon, and the crowd stares at me, but I don't care.

"You can't do this to me," I direct at Timon.

Timon mutters out, "I didn't mean to hit you. I know what you've been through

already. But the potato decided..."

How can you argue with that type of logic? Especially since there's not an ounce of logic in it?

I let out a sigh, and say, "Fine." And I go towards the exit of the building.

"I'm sorry," yelled Timon. "I know you're tired. Take two hours to rest, then..."

I turn to face him, and say, "I would rather get this over with."

Then, I leave the room.

I go under the sun, and allow it to soak into me. They fear I'm tired, but I'm not. For some strange reason, I feel rejuvenated.

I turn into a wolf, and run in the direction where my nose smells something different. I run so fast that the forest turns into a green-brown blur. But my new wolfen eyes can see through the blur, though it is not just with my eyes that I see now. I can see, hear, touch, and taste every part of the forest around me. I know where every tree, every rock, every clump of earth, and every blade of grass is standing. My smell is focused on another purpose: the unknown smell, the human smell. The smell is very similar to a vampire's, but subtly different, like the difference between a brown squirrel and a gray squirrel. There is an added smell to the human, very similar to wild violets. As I run through the grass, and relish the feeling of cool earth beneath my paws, I notice a familiar odor nearby. I focus my eyes, and see a woodchuck two feet away, trying to run from me. It suddenly realizes it cannot escape me, and braces itself for death. As I race past it, my other sense tell me that it stays transfixed in that position for more than a minute, and then scurries off. I go on, and am amazed by how far the human is. We are all told the range of a seer's senses, but, until one feels the length of this distance, it is only words.

I sense the human is very close, so I turn back into a vampire. *So intoxicating, must have it. Want to take the human, drink its blood, drain it completely, throw its empty, filthy husk away. The smell of blood so strong. Old One said I could become human, so do it now.*

The madness is gone, but I have lost so much. Being human is disgusting. I have no sense of the forest, I feel small, and I know I am the weakest creature here. For the first time in my life, I feel utterly alone.

I'm lost, and I don't know where the human is. Nothing inside of me is talking, only my eyes are working. I run around, looking all around me, salty water comes out of my forehead, and there's pounding in my chest.

Then, I see the human, and try to force myself to calm. I cannot fully do it, but it will have to do.

The human looks like a vampire, but less so. It does not reach the beauty of a vampire woman, though its dandelion-colored hair does make it seem exotic. Its most unusual feature, though, is its clothing. It has black boots, blue pants, and a shirt filled with black, gray, white, and red squares. Considering our clothing comes in the color of the animal that was killed, this type of coloring always baffles me. Are there blue-skinned animals beyond the forest? It seems ridiculous to assume that there are animals with multi-colored squares covering their skins. The human carries a green pouch on its back. This seems logical, since they do look like a weak species, in constant need of food, comfort, and rest. And it probably has all its needs in that sack.

I step in front of the human, and utter, "What are you doing here?"

At first, it freezes at the sight of me. Then, after its eyes scan me, a smile appears on half its face, as it asks, "What business is it of yours?"

"It's dangerous here."

"You're here."

"That's different."

"Oh, being a man and all."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Listen, Tonto, the last thing I need is some wooden Indian wanna-be telling me what to do. So, get lost."

Then, it walks past me, and away.

If I knew what she was talking about, I probably would have been insulted.

But, since I don't, I follow it, and yell, "Don't go there."

It turns, looks angrily at me, and asks, "Why?"

Good question. What's a good lie? "Because those who have gone there have never returned."

It rolls its eyes, says, "Yeah, right," and continues on.

I wonder why that answer didn't work, as I chase after it, and try to dissuade it from going onward. Nothing works. I try a reverse tactic, of telling it to go that way, but that makes it want to go there more.

Humans are a curious creature, unlike vampires, who are rarely ever curious. Maybe it's because, for vampires, danger is a double-edged sword. Whatever endangers us, is endangered by us.

I can't believe it, but, after a mile, I'm tired.

The human laughs, and says, "It's amazing you got this far."

"Do you mind resting a minute?"

"No. I like the company, even if it is whiney."

I sit on a large, black rock, as she takes off her green pouch, lays it down, and sits on a large, black rock opposite me.

I breathe hard, feeling ridiculous, but she just smiles, and looks genuinely concerned for me.

When I stop breathing, she asks, "What's your name?"

I try to figure out if it's a human name, decide I don't care, and answer, "Claudius."

"I like that name. It's interesting. Unfortunately, I was born from boring parents, so I ended up with the name Janet."

I never heard the name before, so I say, "I like it."

"Well, thanks, anyway. You from a commune?"

"A what?"

"You know, a place where you get away from the 'evils of civilization' and all."

"I guess."

"I figured. You can't exactly find that outfit at the Gap."

What kind of gap? A hole in the ground, a cave? I almost want to give up trying to figure her out.

"I'm from the 'evil place', the city. Do you have a job?"

"I'm a storyteller."

"A writer? What have you written?"

"Nothing you would've read. They're stories only told in the village."

"Oh. I'm a secretary. Pretty dull, huh?"

I don't know, not knowing what a secretary is. By the name, I assume it's someone who keeps secrets, which I guess could be boring. Especially if you have no secrets of your own.

She looks at a grey bracelet on her right wrist, and says, "It's lunch time, you hungry?"

"No."

"Oh, come on," she says, as she takes something in a clear wrapper out of the green pouch. She throws it into my hands, and says, "Here."

I catch it, unwrap it, and see that it's thin, white squares on top of each other. Between them are two purple, thin squares I realize are animal skins, and two thin, pale squares, I can't figure out at all. I'm not sure I'll like this.

She takes out a square for herself, and bites into it. I figure it's etiquette among humans to eat at the same time, so I bite into my square. It's good, and I realize I like it because humans would like it. I also realize I probably wouldn't like the taste of blood in this form.

After I finish, I ask, "Why did you come here?"

"To get out of the city, I guess. My parents died, I dumped my boyfriend for being an ass, and I guess I needed to unwind. Are your parents still alive?"

"Yes," I answer, but I don't tell her that my parents are immortal, until they decide not to be.

Suddenly, I remember I am now human, and ask, "Do you have a mirror?"

"Sure," she says, takes a small, round mirror out of the green pouch, and

hands it to me.

I look in it, because I realize that, unlike vampires, humans can see their reflection in a mirror. We can see it in water, but the image is always blurred. I look, and see how different I look as a human. Others tell me that my hair is black and straight, but now it's brown and fluffy. They tell me my eyes are rose red, but now they're the blue color of the sky at mid-morning. My cheeks look puffy, but they always felt straight. I touch them, and they now feel puffy. My beautiful fangs are gone, and this reminds me of my adolescence. I was the last child to grow fangs, and it was embarrassing for me.

"Vain, aren't we?" she says.

I hand back the mirror, and say, "Sorry."

"I was only joking," she answers, as she puts the mirror back into her green pouch.

Then, she pulls a rounded container out, which, by the swishing sound I hear, I know contains a liquid. She removes the cap on top of the container, puts the opening to her lips, and swallows a tiny portion of the contents. She hands me the container, and I gulp down a little of what's inside. I'm almost positive this isn't water; the liquid is much too sweet. I look inside the container, and see that it is red. I'm absolutely positive that it isn't blood, though.

I hand back the container, and she returns it to the green pouch. Then, she takes her clear wrapper from the square, and mine, and places them inside the green pouch. Obviously, they will be useful to her later on.

She stands up, puts the green pouch on her back, and says, "I'm going, if you want to follow."

"Okay."

I have adjusted to being human, and know where I am, by remembering the configuration of trees and rocks when I was in the wolf form. We walk side by side, and I use a new tactic to get her away from the village. I edge her movements slowly away from the trail I followed, as we continue to talk about our lives, our families, and our dreams. As I start to realize that we are not going near the village, I feel more comfortable about confiding to her. I tell her everything, except one thing.

As we talk, there is a sudden relief, that I don't suddenly sense what she will say next. True, it's a little scary, but it is also liberating, knowing that I don't have to know.

Suddenly, her head jerks to the left, and she quickly rushes away towards that direction. I run after her, and see her behind a tree, looking into a clearing where two boys play.

They are the twins, Castor and Pollux, and, I guess, by human years, they're seven. If I were a vampire, I could tell which was which.

The first boy slaps the second on the back, and yells, "Tag, you're it!" Then the first boy turns into a bat, and flies straight up into the sky, as the second boy turns into a bat, and follows. They spin around in the air, until the first bat lands on the ground, and turns into a rat. The second bat touches the ground, turns into a wolf, and chases after the rat. The rat goes into a hole, and the wolf waits over it. Then, a snake comes out of the ground behind the wolf, and chases after the rat. The rat goes into a hole, and the wolf waits over it. Then, a snake comes out of the ground behind the wolf, and slithers away. The wolf turns its head, sees the snake, yells, "Fink!" and runs after it. The snake turns into a wolf, braces itself, and the other falls on top of it. Both turn back into children, and laugh.

Janet's eyes and mouth are wide open, as she asks, "How can they do that?"

"They're vampires," I answer.

She turns to look at me, and asks, "How do you know?"

I allow myself to transform into my true shape, and say, "I am a vampire."

It's strange, but I no longer feel the blood lust. Just confused and sad.

Janet backs away, and lets out breaths that are meant to be screams.

"Are you going to kill me?" she asks.

"I'm supposed to," I answer.

But, I don't want to, not now. I think for a few seconds, and say, "I'll let

you go, if you promise not to tell anyone about us."

"There's more of you?"

"Yes, a village. Do you promise not to tell anyone?"

"Yes."

"Good. Now leave."

"Can I see the village first?"

I let out a breath of exasperation, and say, "No."

"Please."

"If they catch you..."

"I'll worry about that."

I realize I've never been able to persuade her to do anything yet, so I say, "Okay, but you have to agree to do everything I tell you."

She agrees, and we walk towards the village. It's quite a few miles more, but it doesn't bother me any longer. It bothers her, though, but I understand.

After a long time, and a short time of hearing her breathe hard, I ask, "Do you want to rest for a while?"

She nods, and we sit opposite each other in the grass.

She looks at the grey bracelet on her wrist, and says, "It's suppertime."

She takes out another square in a clear wrapper, and asks, "Are you hungry? And, don't get any bright ideas."

"No. We only eat when we feel hungry."

She eats quietly, and, after, stands up, and says, "Let's go."

As we continue, she asks questions about our lives, and I try to answer the best I can, even though some of the questions are confusing.

When we finally reach the village, it is dark out. I position Janet to sit behind a thicket, where she can watch the village but not be seen.

I feel it fortunate that the break-up between me and Clytemestra was a friendly one, because she probably trusts me right now. Enough not to sense what I'm doing now, and to tell the other seers to turn off their senses.

The village is pretty busy today. The letter carrier turns into a bat, and drops messages in front of every house. A mother turns into a wolf, lets her young daughter on her back, and races around the village at full speed. Galen locked himself out of his house again. So, he turns into a rat, and runs under his door to get in. So much for the great hunter. What interests Janet most, though, is a dance which goes on within a large gap between houses. The musicians play their instruments, as couples dance, holding each other very close. As they dance, they change into different animal shapes. If the couple changes into the same animal shape, they dance on. If they don't, they fall over and laugh.

"What does the dance mean?" she asks.

"If the couple can change into the same animal shape at the same time, it's supposed to mean that they're in love."

"Neither one knows what the other will be?"

"That's supposed to be how it works. You see that couple who never make a mistake?"

She nods.

"I know them, and, in fact, everyone does. They pre-arrange their movements before they come here."

She covers her mouth, so that she can laugh with only me hearing, and says, "I always thought vampires were monsters."

"We can be."

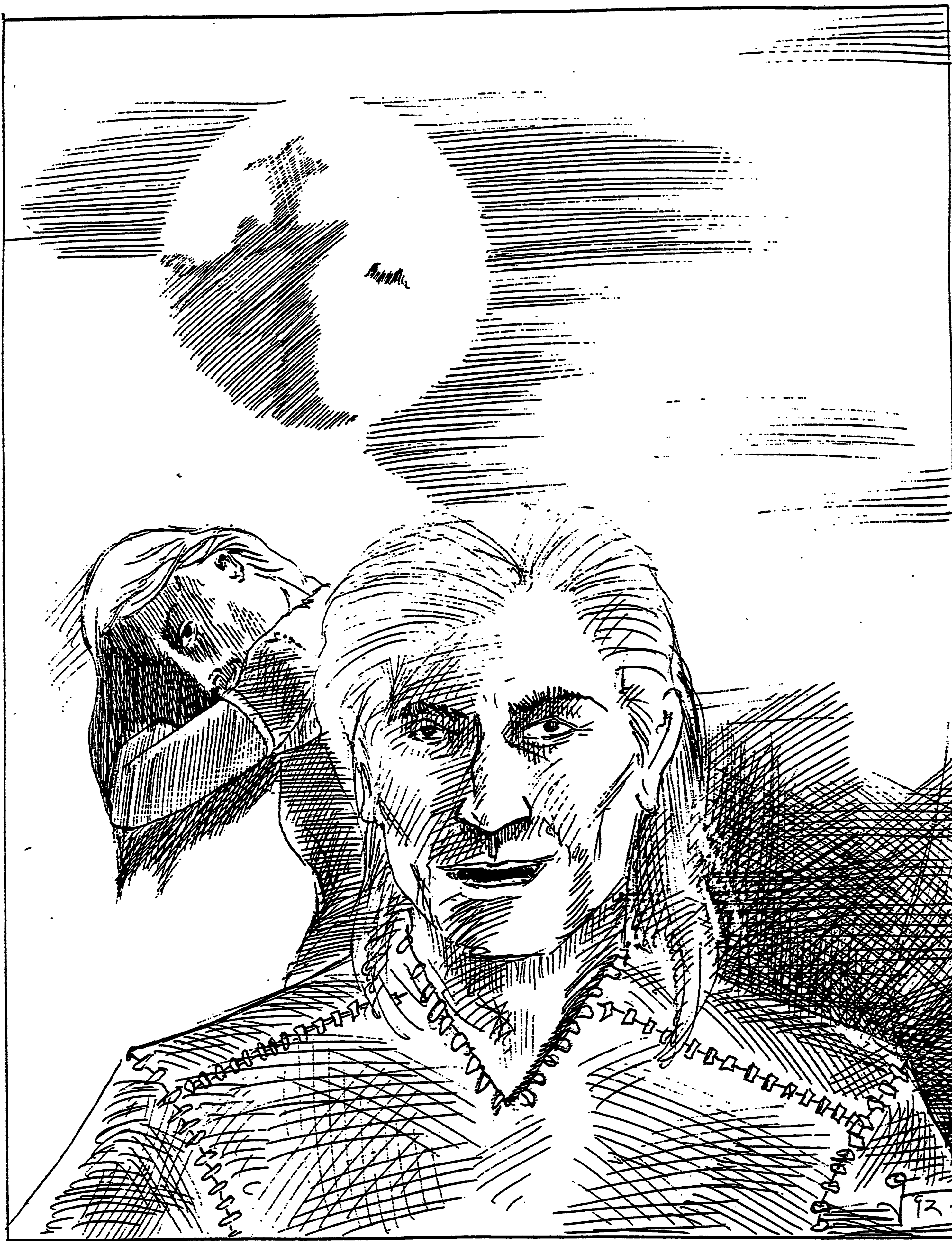
"That's not what I mean."

She gazes at the dance. Then, her head snaps back at me, and she says, "You were with me all day, and you didn't turn into dust. Don't vampires do that?"

I recall what the Old One said, and say, "Only those who didn't want to be vampires when it happened have that weakness."

"And you were born a vampire, and didn't know anything else," she says, as she looks back to the dance.

As Janet watches, a sadness covers her face. She looks as I felt the first time I became a human: Alone. She seems to have realized how utterly alone she's always been as a human, and never knew. Still, from being a human, for just a



little while. I realize one must be alone, sometimes.

I believe the Old One said he was bitten on the neck to become a vampire, so I decide to do this for her. I bend down, and try to bite her on the neck before she knows what's going on. Her soft, pink neck looks tempting, and I feel the familiar pangs of the blood lust. *Drain the human, suck it dry. But, will kill her.* Can I drink just enough, but not kill her? I don't know.

Slowly, a thought emerges, an instinct almost vanished from disuse.

"Janet," I call, and she stands up to face me.

I hold her hand, feeling the blood circulate beneath her fingertips, and say, "If you truly wish to be a vampire, then you are a vampire."

She changes ever so slightly. Her eyes turn a purplish-pink, as her hair turns a golden yellow, and her newly-formed fangs shine. Her face whitens, as her whole body curves ever more. She is the most beautiful vampire woman I have ever seen.

We smile to each other, turn into bats, and play under the moonlight.

- The End -

[Lyle MacDougall has been writing all his life. In high school, he wrote skits for a comedy troupe called HA. In college, he wrote freelance articles for the college newspaper. Later, he wrote a comic strip for the college newspaper called Professional Freeloading. It was about college life, as you probably figured out. Recently, he sold a story to Aberations called "The Waking Man".]



APRIL'S DREAM

by

Jack Summers

The full moon cast shafts of pure white light over the meandering valley tucked between two Appalachian foothills. The stream that carved the cleft in the land over the centuries murmured contentedly to the rocks that lined the creek bed.

A young doe dropped her muzzle cautiously into the stream and drank. She lifted her head and sniffed the air. Her muscles tensed. April Marsh smiled to herself. The scent of the animal's fear was exhilarating, as it always was.

The air around her wavered, and with a swiftness too quick for the human eye to follow, April left the security of the trees and fastened her long, needle-like fangs to the animal's throat. She wrapped her arms around the doe's neck and locked her long, supple legs around its torso like steel springs.

The warm, rusty taste of the blood from the doe's jugular vein coursed into April's mouth and she drank greedily. She felt the pounding of the doe's heart as it hammered in the helpless creature's chest. April's own heart joined the rhythm.

Perceptibly, both hearts began to slow. April's body, replenished by the gift of blood, reacted with a slower beat. The doe, its life flowing into April in a glorious rush, began to weaken. The noble heart slowed, then stopped.

April gently lay the empty shell on the ground. Dipping water from the stream she tenderly washed the blood from the animal's neck and lovingly kissed the wound. A tear escaped the corners of her mysterious gray eyes and trickled across her cheek.

April knew the kill was necessary. Ever since her brother Caleb gave her the gift, she needed the blood. Unlike the others, she only killed humans when there was no other choice. Living in the isolation of Marsh Hollow allowed her to hunt the fertile woodlands, taking animals as she needed them. She was still angry with Caleb because he let her kill humans for more than a year before she found out animals would do. Animals were not as satisfying as humans, but good enough.

She hoisted the doe effortlessly and moved swiftly through the forest, across the open meadow full of ripening grain. She came to a split rail fence at the edge of the tumble-down farm yard.

An oil lamp gleamed in the window of the farm house behind an oil cloth cover. Smoke curled lazily toward the full moon from the tin pipe chimney. The tar paper roof sagged and the siding was patched in a dozen places with pitch and tar paper.

With her razor sharp teeth, April slashed the throat of the doe. Gliding silently over the fence, she removed the length of rope from her pocket and tied the rear legs together. She easily slipped the doe upside down on the draining rack in the yard.

She moved stealthily to the back of the cabin. As she passed the coon hound tied to a metal stake in the ground, he rose to growl, till he saw her. He whimpered back into the shadows. She floated to the one window that was glass and peered inside.

Evan Carson sat in his wheelchair, intently staring at the Bible on his lap.

How much he reminded her of her father, Ephraim, who was paralyzed by a slate fall in the mines. The gift freed him from the chair, but changed him into a cruel, vicious creature she didn't know anymore. That wouldn't solve Evan's problems. She owed him too much to ever do that to him.

First, his plight gave a fitting end to her kills. Carson had no idea that the perfectly dressed carcasses that appeared on the draining rail were placed there by a hunter beyond his imaginings. He only relished the meat for his family. It was something he could never give them himself. She could use the blood, they could use the meat.

Then, there was the child. She was three years old, conceived literally the day the tree crushed Evan's spine. Golden curls framed her cherubic face like spun glass. Her ruddy cheeks surrounded a pug nose that seemed always to need wiping. She loved Sandy Carson, the child she could never have. Cold bitter tears filled her eyes, and with a savage snarl, she tore herself from the window and moved with the supernatural power of the gift back to Marsh Hollow.

She sat by The Run, the unnamed little stream that carved the valley, and reflected. She had been happy there once. The last of the seventeen Marsh children, her life had been one of pleasant drudgery, until Caleb brought the gift back from the city, where he had gone to find work.

Ida, April, their father, Ezrah, Isaiah, Sheba, Daniel, Diane, Bonnie and Jubal welcomed the gift. Two older brothers were dead of natural causes. The others refused the gift and were consumed by it. The family lived in the valley, hunted in the valley, and killed humans in distant places. April hardly knew them anymore. Her once loving family was now a marauding band of demons.

She appreciated the gift. Her pain, the physical infirmities, and the weariness were gone. For that, she was grateful. Yet, the daylight was gone. So was the laughter, the warmth of the sun, and a thousand other things that separated her from her mortal past.

A noise in the woods behind her broke her reverie. Her keen hearing heard the crack of the branch he stepped on. It was as loud as a rifle shot to her sensitive ears. She listened to his tense, irregular breathing. She smelled the sweat, inhaled his fear. He was human, likely someone from the village of Webster. Occasionally, one came nosing around the valley, until one of the others caught him. One instant her back was to him. In a flicker, she faced him.

He stepped into the clearing. He was a tall man with broad, strong shoulders. He was dressed in black from head to toe, and a silver crucifix on a long chain around his neck gleamed in the moonlight. He held a Bible in his callused right hand.

"Daughter of Satan, repent and ask for the mercy of the Almighty Father, before I send your black soul to hell."

"You must be Pastor Sandy. I've heard my brothers speak of you. Did you really come all the way from New York City to find us?"

"There is nowhere on this earth that your kind is safe from the wrath of God. Your abominable brother killed my niece. I swore I would find you. Now, he will see what it means to lose one close to him."

"Doesn't that book under your arm say, 'Vengeance is Mine, saith the Lord?' Sounds to me like you're trying to usurp God's authority."

"Blaspheming harlot! How dare you quote to Gospel to me!"

"Why shouldn't I? If your God is in charge of everything, that means He made my kind, too. I'm one of God's children, or creatures if you prefer."

"You are not a child of God. You are a black, evil demon from the bowels of hell, and I will send you back there."

"Reverend, you have no power in this valley. Leave now, while you still can. It is not my desire to harm you. But, if my brothers should come, I cannot be responsible."

"Is that so?" A malevolent smile circled the corners of his mouth. He pulled the chain over his neck, and holding the twisted figure of Jesus in front of him like a lance, he advanced toward her. To his surprise, she didn't retreat.

Her hand snaked out and plucked the crucifix from his. She turned it over,

examining the pained expression on the effigy. "The workmanship is acceptable." She tossed it back to him.

"Preacher, your knowledge of the gift is imperfect. Your mind is filled with fairy tales penned by a story teller. Your sacred trinkets, running water, garlic..." She smiled a sympathetic little smile. "Now leave, please before..."

The air around the Parson wavered, like heat from the highway on a summer day, and congealed into the ominous shape of a massive, powerful man. Long black hair whipped around his solid face. The same grey eyes that were the mark of the Marsh clan sat beneath a broad forehead. High cheekbones and a square jaw completed a face of enormous power. Without hesitation, he sank his fangs into the helpless man's throat, while holding him immobile in a grip of iron.

Repulsed by the needless taking of life, April still could not look away. The victim's expression was a curious mixture of surprise and terror as he kicked and thrashed in the air like a puppet on a strong rope. It slowly, perceptibly, changed to one of resignation, then fatigue, and at last the cold lifeless stare of the dead.

Caleb's face was striking in its contrast. His superhuman strength gave him a sense of invulnerability. His bloodshot, hungry eyes were hard and cruel as he sucked the life from the helpless mortal. A look of contentment followed as he consumed the blood, caught up in the rhythm of the kill.

When the blood was drained, a look of disappointment crossed Caleb's face, and he tossed the lifeless shell carelessly to the ground.

"There, Little Sister. The scraps of the meal. When we were mortal, you cleaned up after we ate. Why should it be different now? You are such a disappointment to me. Had I not been here, you would have let him go, to bring more of his kind snooping around the valley. That might make it necessary to take the entire village of Webster. You wouldn't want that on your head, would you?" He laughed sardonically and was gone.

She still loved Caleb, but she hated what he had become, a foul, vicious predator, killing for sport, rather than need. He was no different than the hunters he hated so much when he was mortal. They killed the deer, took the antlers and left the carcasses to rot. Caleb did the same.

"Foolish man," she said out loud as she picked up the body. She took him to an abandoned mine shaft three miles north of Webster. The cold damp ground, the dripping water, the creaks and groans of the rusting roof bolts and timbers as they moaned under the weight of the mountain were music to her ears.

Unhindered by the dark, April carried the body through the maze of tunnels till she came to an open room the size of a football field. The coal had been mined to the slate walls creating a gigantic chamber with a vaulted ceiling. Reverently, she placed the body at the end of a line that contained hundreds of others in varying states of decay.

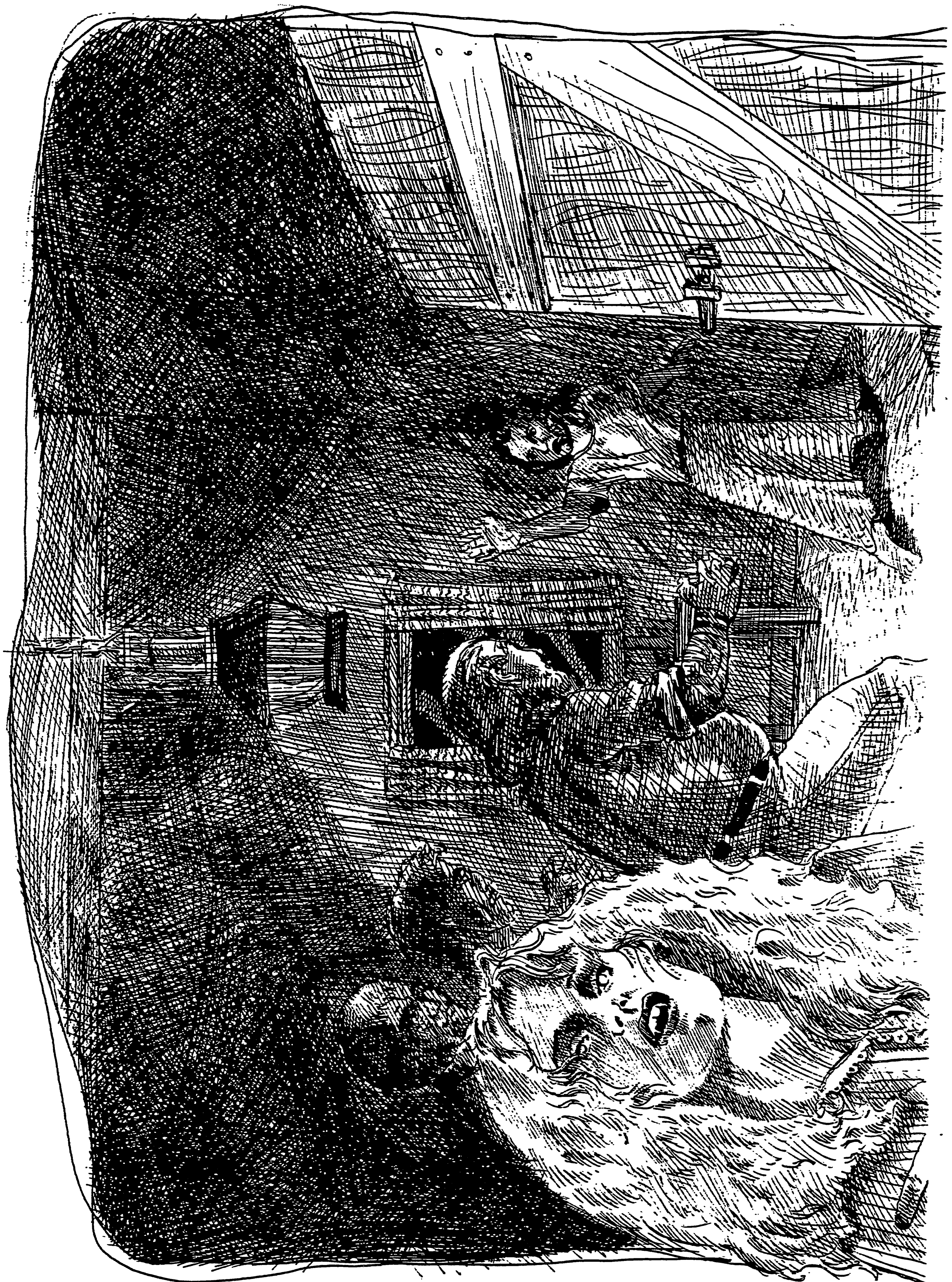
With a heavy sigh, she said a few sacred words over the body and hurried from the shaft. The sky in the east glimmered with the impending dawn. She raced back to Marsh Hollow, and into the windowless room that had been added to the back of the original Marsh homestead.

She slipped into the last of the ten coffins in the room that still had an open lid. The rest of the family was already asleep. April closed the lid as the sun broached the mountain to the east and flooded Marsh Hollow with late summer sunshine. She dreamed of gossamer hair, pale blue eyes, and tinkling childish laughter.

*

Two nights later, April carried the five rabbits that had been her kill toward the Carson farm. As she approached the fence, her senses bristled. There were three mortals in the tree line behind the cabin.

As she stopped to assess the situation, they bolted for the cabin, smashed in the door and muscled their way into the front room. April heard Sandy Carson scream, followed by a bellow of rage from Evan.



April flashed to the door and stood in the shadows outside the shaft of light that emanated from inside. The three men were from Webster. Sam, a tall, ugly man, with an enormous gut that hung over his belt like a pregnancy, was the leader. Charles, a weasel-faced ferret with beady eyes, and Homer, a huge, retarded brute completed the trio. They were drunk. April could easily smell the corn whiskey.

Martha Carson was a beautiful woman. She was tall and lean, with flowing blond hair, a full breasted figure, long shapely legs and the same crystal blue eyes she had given Sandy. She grabbed a rolling pin and defiantly faced the intruders. "Get out of here, right now! What do you want?"

Sam smiled, exposing yellow, tobacco-stained teeth. "We come ta git us a little somethin'. Fine woman like you got ta be lonesome up here with no man to take care of ya. We're gonna do that real good."

Evan lunged at the man from his wheelchair. Sam pushed him aside harmlessly, then kicked over the chair spilling Evan painfully onto the floor. "Stay down there cripple, or I'll have ta bash yer brains in. In fact, I think I'll just do it anyhow."

He kicked Evan viciously in the head and turned toward Martha. "Let's have us a little fun, mamma."

April sent out a telepathic message to Jubal. He was the brother born two years before her. In their mortal life, they had been lovers. In a single bound, she leaped across the threshold into the room.

When she saw Sandy, it was all she could to to control her rage. When the door had been flung open, it struck the child, knocking her senseless. She lay bleeding from a small cut on her forehead. The sight of the blood made April shiver with desire, but she beat back the hunger.

The three men turned to face the beautiful, pale young woman in the doorway. April's face was contorted with rage.

"Lookie here, Sam, we got us another one for our little party. She looks as good as the older one," said Charlie, a malevolent smile on his lips.

"Go now, while you still can. If you don't leave now, you will all die." April's voice was calm and quiet despite her anger.

Sam laughed. "You take her, Charlie. I still want the cripple's wife."

Sam never saw April move, but he felt the powerful hands on his shoulders as she picked him up and hurled him against the wall of the cabin. The impact knocked the breath out of him. Stunned, he slithered to a sitting position on the floor.

Homer grabbed April from behind in a bear hug and began to squeeze. She flung her arms outward, breaking the hold as if he were a child. April smashed her fist into the giant's chest, knocking him head over heels through the doorway. Charlie ran from the cabin in terror. April heard the crash of the breaking underbrush and the muffled curses of fear as the two men raced for the safety of the woods.

She turned around to find Sam standing behind Martha, his arm around her throat and a pistol leveled at April. She heard the rush of wind in the darkness outside the cabin door.

"I warned you. I told you to leave. Now it's too late. Put down the gun and your death will be swift and painless. Harm the woman and you will suffer beyond anything you can possibly imagine."

"We'll see who dies, you bitch!" He pulled the trigger.

The bullet struck April in the chest. The impact knocked her back against the door frame. To Sam's amazement, she did not go down. She smiled, reached into the neat round hole in her chest with her index finger and pried out the copper projectile. The wound closed without a scar.

In terror, Sam emptied the remaining five rounds into her. She ignored them and advanced resolutely forward. He pushed Martha into April's arms and ran into the darkness. The night erupted with a chilling scream, to be followed by eerie silence.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, I think so," answered Martha, in a voice that was choked with gratitude and anxiety.

From the floor, Evan groaned as his head started to clear. At that same moment, Sandy rolled up to her knees and looked groggily around the room.

"I don't know who or what you are, but thank you."

"Call me your guardian angel. I've been looking after your family for some time now. I love you as if you were my own flesh and blood. No one will ever harm you. She is the daughter I can never have."

"The game?"

April smiled. "They never need to know where it comes from."

"Are you... from..."

"Yes, I'm from Marsh Hollow. My name is April."

Evan rubbed his eyes and looked at them. "What happened? Where did they go? Who are you?"

"Easy, Evan, you've had a nasty knock on the head. Lucky for us this young lady happened along. She had a pistol and chased them away." She nodded toward the revolver on the floor. "You should have seem 'em go. They looked like a bunch of scared rabbits."

April knelt by Sandy. With an extraordinary force of will, she wiped the blood from the child's forehead. It took all her strength not to lick the blood from her fingers. "Are you okay, little one?" Sandy smiled and put her arms around April's neck. The warmth from the child rushed through her, and April's heart skipped a beat.

"I'm sorry, miss, I didn't get your name."

"April. Just call me April."

Martha smiled warmly at her. "April, we can't thank you enough for what you did for us. Feel free to drop by any evening you want. Things are pretty hectic here during the day. But, come over anytime after dark. It gets a little lonesome out here, and I'd appreciate another woman to talk to. Besides, you and Sandy seem to hit it off pretty well. The two of you could get to be real friends."

Half an hour later, after helping Martha fix the battered door so it would close, April walked across the yard to the fence. Jubal sat on the top rail, his long blond hair flowing in the warm night breeze.

"Thanks for the snack, Sis. What was all that about?"

"You know, Jubal, I always wanted to have a child of my own. Tonight, I got one. I'm gonna take care of Sandy and her family. Evan is just like Poppa when he was in the chair. Help me keep the others away from them."

"The gift never blunted your sentimentality, did it? I noticed the woman about a month ago. She's a sweet thing. For old time's sake, I'll let her alone. But, only on one condition."

"What's the condition?"

"Take care of that." He pointed towards Sam's lifeless body on the other side of the fence.

"No problem. That's likely to be my role in the Marsh family for the rest of eternity." They both laughed. Jubal hugged her. The air around him flickered, and he was gone.

She took the body to the mines. This time, she went down a different tunnel. The water dripped freely and the walls of the tunnel were alive with glowing red eyes. The silence was broken by the padding of furry feet.

She came to a small room, filled with brackish sulfur water. Human bones were scattered around the edges of the underground pond. She pitched the body into the water and listened as the rats swarmed in to feast.

April closed the lid of the coffin and breathed in the aroma of the satin lining. She searched for Jubal. He was asleep. She smiled. In moments, she too was asleep. She dreamed of gossamer hair, crystal blue eyes, and tinkling laughter. She dreamed a dream come true.

- The End -



[Jack L. Summers, author of "April's Dream", accepted or published works:

"Eleven to Seven," STARSONG. September 1991.
"Caleb," MISS LUCY WESTERNRA SOCIETY OF THE UNDEAD. To appear in the next issue, mid 1992.
"Kraken Lives," THE GATE. Accepted for July 1992 issue.
"Appalachian Bluebeard," ABERATIONS. Accepted for publication, date pending.
"The Resting Place," VLAD THE IMPALER VOL. III. Publication date July 1992.]



THE UNWILLING KILL

Blue moonlight floods the lonely lot;
mundane by day, eerie under starshine.
Mist drifts to reveal a solitary car
of some nighttime reveler.
A man cradles a woman in his arms;
she falls limply against his bare shoulder.
To a distant watcher a scene of passion
since they cannot view the blood--
blood, red and steaming still,
runnelling down his naked body as he raises
his head and screams despair to
grinning skull-moon and unfeeling sky.

Janet P. Reedman



CATCHING CAT

by

Athan Y. Chilton

My first conscious feeling was bewilderment. I couldn't feel my body. No pain yet. I didn't understand how much pain there would be, on the other side of this stillness.

Something finally registered in my awareness, something physical. I was lying across the two front seats of the VW beetle. In the fog and darkness I could dimly see my legs, one flung up against the steering wheel and the other out the window on the driver's side. Only--this made no sense--my foot was pointing towards what I thought was the sky. But everything was unreal and meaningless. Paul Leluvo, I thought, what have you done to yourself this time?

I tried to move, to right myself. My fear began then in the surreal silence, as I realized I was injured, far worse than I knew. I could barely move my right arm and nothing else. My legs might have belonged to a scarecrow for all their response.

I lay still again, surging helpless terror rising in my brain. Pain crept in with it--only the pain was more like electricity jolting up and down my spine. Or was that the fear? I resisted the impulse to move again. I could see that the steering column had buckled inward, trapping me at the waist as it pinned me against the broken and twisted seats.

Some dim recollection of a truck on the narrow mountain road came to me then; I grasped at it, hoping to unravel the meaning of finding myself trapped, probably dying, in my car on this mountainside.

Yes, I'd--we'd--been driving north on Highway 1--I remembered fog, and the way the headlights made shapeshifting magical forms as we climbed toward the crest of the road that led down to Stinson Beach--and happiness--we'd been laughing, hadn't we?

I was alone in the car. Who had been laughing with me, her happiness a blaze of light in the wind coming in her window? Where was she? I heard again the unbelievable grinding of gears as the truck careened in our view, she and I staring in shock, she silent as if some long-dreaded nightmare was upon her. I heard again my own voice roaring nonsense syllables, her name, curses and threats, before the darkness descended.

But the pain was coming for me now. I had closed my eyes, or else they were open but I could no longer see. It didn't matter. She was imprinted on my memory now, the laughing mite of her, my sweetly singing firefly. Surely she would come for me soon.

Pain--a roaring, looming wave--hanging over me. I could hear it too, a terrible harsh gasping sound, in time with my own breathing. Or maybe it was just my breathing? No, something's coming, moving slowly, implacably, the way things in bad dreams do. Its approach reverberated in my mind.

Then, with strange clarity, I heard someone crying. The sound set off sparks in my brain, as if I should know the voice, the meaning of it here and now. But even the effort of listening became unbearable, as the spoked wheels of pain descended on me. Annihilated beneath those wheels, my senses dilated and dispersed. When I felt something tug where my arm probably was, when a last explosive awareness blasted me with the final knowledge that she was there at

last--Calli Calli, I feel you, I love you--it was far too late.

With all my strength I tried to reach her, let her know I'd heard her coming, tell her I loved her here at the end of everything. But as if I'd dreamed her coming, I heard nothing but the sound of the wind from the Pacific over the hill and I saw nothing but the light-filled peace of the void widening before me.

Later--some other time--I opened my eyes again. I saw a body on the hospital table--emergency room--all sorts of equipment--but there was nobody in the room but me. At least, I didn't think so. But then I saw, from this peculiar vantage point, something else.

A huge black cat poised itself beside the whitedraped table where that partially covered body lay.

What, I wondered in bodiless curiosity, is that cat doing here?

I hovered, watching. I wondered if I were dead already. Why weren't the doctors standing over me? Had they given up? I sure wasn't in that body, I knew that much; I didn't hurt.

The silent, slim cat leaped upon the broken body and gazed with green eyes into the still, staring face.

Then I came back into my body. The pain grew so huge it threatened to drown me. I shut a door on it, somehow, with a will that I'd never had in life. I knew I couldn't move, would never dance nor love nor play the drums anymore, but if I just held very still the agony would pass me by.

I struggled to breathe.

I stared back into the cat's penetrating gaze. Not that I could do much of anything else. Funny, I thought, either I can't feel a thing or that's not a real cat. It's a great big black cat, its green eyes staring into mine like twin lighthouses in the darkness...but it doesn't seem to weigh anything.

Be calm. The pain will end.

What?

Who spoke?

Nobody spoke. I thought. You can hear me. I'm Cat.

What do you want?

Your life.

Cat's mental voice hissed and shrilled as a real cat's voice would.

In my mind I laughed. Perhaps my body even made a sound, for all I knew; Cat drew back as if offended.

You want my life? Take it, then, I thought. *It's not like I can stop you or anything. I'm going to die anyway. But why do you want what little's left of my life?*

So that we both live, snarled Cat.

Quit riddling me, Cat, I thought. *I'm about to die and you're telling me my death will give both of us life?*

This reminds me of stories handed down by my great-grandfather, the Lowara whom everybody said I took after. He told my grandmother all those old eastern European superstitions. He was sure that if a cat jumped over a dying person, especially if nobody else was watching, the dying one might become a vampire instead. A vampire! This is 1967, not a hundred years ago. Son of the Gypsies I am, but I don't believe those old tales, nor am I a traveler of the endless road, unless you count my footloose musician's life.

What the hell, I'm dying anyway. Ask a stupid question, maybe you won't get a stupid answer.

Cat, are you a vampire?

Gypsy you may be, hissed Cat, *but remarkably slow of mind. However, you have guessed rightly for once in your life. I'm a vampire.*

And I'm the perfect victim, I thought back, conscious now of the darkness waiting to return and claim me.

I'm not in any condition to fight you, as you can see.

All mortals face their eventual dissolution, came the soft mental growl of its reply. *But only rarely do such as I intervene in my present cause, and only then in situations of extremity.*

I wished I could laugh out loud. Pity I was done for; I'd never had a mental

debate with a cat before. Or a vampire.

What the hell do you really want with me? I thought.

Hell has nothing to do with it, rasped the cat that was not a cat, its face inches from mine. *Hell was created by mortals in their sickness and separation from their natural world, the mother who fed and nurtured them. We never had anything to do with your Hell, so kindly save yourself the effort of consigning me to that wholly imaginary locale. We have more important business at hand in these few remaining instants of your human existence.*

Yeah, I said dreamily, *you want to hasten what's left of my demise.*

Stupid, very stupid, hissed my demonic counselor. *I have watched you, I have listened to your music, its power and control of elemental passion, its discipline and its abandon. You can't understand yet...how these are things we long for, we hope for. I want you for my own. I want to make you immortal, as I am immortal, freed from the death that is creeping through your veins to silence this conversation.*

You're saying you want to make me a vampire? Why on earth should I do that? I asked. But the Darkness was traveling closer every second. I lay transfixed by its rumbling song, death's freight train hurtling on towards my last midnight.

Last stop, Leluvo. End of line. Unless...

You should permit me to transform you because you are rare among mortals! Cat hissed.

The green eyes widened in rage and passion, sucked me into their depths. Green they were, green as the woods on the island where I'd camped and played alone, a wild child, those most free and happy days of my life.

That's when they'd begun to say, Paul is like old Leluvo, he's the wild one, he'll never settle down. I hadn't, either, had I? Marriage and child had gone by me like storm clouds, lost beyond a hundred cities and nightclubs and gigs of my endless rhythmic migrations. I never did want to put down any roots after that. Not until I met my little lightfooted lady, my lady of the magical voice. Calli was strange, but she was magical, I'd been willing to give her my life; she was the tomorrow I'd never guessed at--

Hey, Cat! I gasped, pulling back from the green vision that had nearly swallowed me. *You can't make me a vampire! What would Calli think if my body disappeared out of here? What if she found out I was a vampire? She'd kill me all over again!*

You ignorant, foolish, unperceptive mortal pile of sludge, sang my tormentor. *Have I been wrong to choose you? Callina would do no such thing, believe me. Her love for you is such that she would rather by far see you taken by what you would call the supernatural, than what she perceives as the utter finality of physical death. But there is no more time for talking now.*

The slanting green eyes swam in strange red tears.

Then I stared into...Calli's eyes, green as eucalyptus leaves in her pale stricken face.

I reached for her, forgetting that I could no longer move.

*

Cat had vanished. Calli held my smashed and broken body in her thin arms; her red hair fell down on my face. All the little deaths of autumn were in her hair. Flowers of blood fell on my eyelids. Somehow her tears were full of blood too as she kissed my mouth that could no longer kiss her back.

Then I saw the sharp feline fangs in her beautiful mouth.

Yes, you can have my life, all of it, I said silently to her. *I gave myself to you in life, so I am yours in my death.*

Dreamily I felt her lick my throat. Her teeth broke through my skin. It didn't hurt--I was already dead, wasn't I? But no, my blood thundered a hundred horses strong in my ears; the light beat on me, wavering like sunlight on water; I flew back to my childhood's dream beneath the island trees...

Out of the light again I fell, into harsher light and a fractured vision. Calli was a glowing outline floating above me, a shadow against the glare. The

softness of her wrist brushed my cold face, held firm against my mouth.
My mind came shuddering awake. So did my pain.
She spoke, Calli spoke, her voice so soft, even in my mind.
She said, *Drink*.
I thought, I hope it doesn't hurt this much once I'm done being dead.
Incense heat burned its way down my throat. I tried to recoil once.
I swallowed. I drank.

*

Unmade, unraveled, finally unbound, I tore free of the crawling darkness. Give me the light, give me this moment beyond death's sideshow haunted house. My soul is spinning at the lonesome crossroads, which way home? Calli burned, beckoning in my exploding brain. Follow, follow, follow, she beckoned, follow the trees water light dancing--follow the drums.

Drums for dancing, drums for celebration; how strange and wonderful, I thought, I have heard the gods drumming at the heart of the universe.

Into wakefulness I fell.

The pain came again, my previous pain played backwards, culminating in an electrical shock that burned and blazed from the base of my spine to my brain and sent me unconscious for another moment.

But Calli was still in my arms and I could feel her. I could feel my arms and legs, could feel the agony still racing up and down my spine. But even as I paid attention to these sensations they began to fade.

We have to go, she said silently still.

I wasn't ready to move. I wanted to hold her, wanted to thank her, wanted her to stay with me.

But suddenly she was the spirit Cat again, and leaping clear across my body she smiled a farewell that said *Follow me*, and she was gone.

I sat up. My neck hurt where her teeth had driven in. And when I put my right hand up to my mouth, it came away bloody. I knew it wasn't my blood. I licked it, feeling only scant strangeness in the act; the blood was winedark and headier than any vintage. It tasted of Calli.

I slid off the table and looked ruefully at myself. Apparently I was healing quickly, whatever I'd become. But I'd better get out of here before somebody found me--somebody who thought they'd left a dead man on this table.

I thought about the band, my companions whom I loved, the recordings we'd made, the music we'd shared. Then I laughed to myself. Paul, you've got all the time in the world now. You and Calli too. To make the best music you can. To love without end. Never to grow old, never to lose each other to time.

Calli, wait for me! I looked around, a little panicky, and snatched up the torn clothing I'd had on when they brought me into the hospital.

No, that won't do!

There! A scrub suit, green pants and shirt, I'm just another orderly, right?

Calli, or Cat, where are you?

I stepped out into the hall. There she was, down the corridor where it was curiously dim. She beckoned to me, playfully, switching her tail.

Catch me if you can, newborn one, she sang in my head, and she danced away into the darkness. I shrugged and tried to will myself to her--and found myself outside in the blowing gorgeous San Francisco night.

I fell into a kaleidoscope's heart as my vision swam and fractured uncontrollably. I was standing on my own feet. I could see colors and movement as I'd never seen anything before.

I'm alive!

"Cat! Calli!" I started to laugh, involuntarily. "Is this real? Or am I really dead in there on that table?"

She flickered in my view, changing from cat to woman and back again too quickly for my eyes to follow yet. Her laughter was something between a purr and a human chuckle; it was delightfully low and rich and inviting.

Then she was a woman, my Calli, the only soul who'd ever seen down to the



heart and soul of me and opened me up wide to her generous and wholehearted love of life.

Had she been this marvelous, this warm and delightful, in life? How long had she been an immortal? What had Cat meant when she'd said she'd been watching me?

Her elvish smile deepened as though she'd read my thoughts.

"It meant I'd been watching you, silly," she said softly. Oh God, I could really hear her. It was all I could do to hold myself still and listen to her.

"I was selfish, Paul. I couldn't let go of you. I had won you at last, and I was prepared to live a mortal lifetime with you. I wasn't ready to think about what would happen when you discovered, as certainly you would have, that I did not age as you did. Though I can assume an appearance of age, just as I can both eat and drink as mortals do, I do not need to do these things. I can do them when love of a mortal allows me to assume mortal ways."

Her green eyes were full of red tears again as she flung herself into my arms.

"It was so scary when I realized I'd fallen in love with you. I couldn't tell you the truth--but I was afraid you'd guess it anyway, and you'd hate me, or kill me. And yet I wanted to take you as I have now...to take your life and give you mine in return."

I held her as I'd held the Calli I'd thought as mortal as myself; she held me as she'd held me when I was mortal Paul Leluvo, drummer for Magical Merlin's Band.

"Do you see," she asked wistfully, looking up at me, "do you see, now, what I meant, when I said, so that we both will live?"

"I don't know, yet," I said, overwhelmed by the rushing wind, the lights, the pulsating violence of humanity all around me, psychedelic as anything. "But I know I'd be dead for all time if you hadn't come for me."

"Yes," she nodded. "But you have such a powerful spirit, you were still clinging to life. And to me! You called me, Paul! You called out to me so strongly when we were on the mountainside; I knew I couldn't let you die. I had to take the chance, though I knew you might condemn me at the last, you might very well refuse the gift I offered. And I didn't think I could stand it if you reviled me so I showed myself as Cat..."

"I needed you," she said pleadingly. "I am immortal, yes. Only the direct sunlight can really harm me. Oh, yes, I can be killed, as can you--but it is not easy. But I did not want to go on living as an immortal if you died. Maybe that was selfish of me, but you see...that is why we live. I think, anyway...to have a...a symbiosis with mortals. We understand dreams, we could teach mortals to love their imaginations, not to fear them. And maybe some rare ones would come to love us, and share their warmth with us, share their blood with us, and they would be our reason for living. Vampires are lonely, Paul. There are not so many of us as the folktales make out. We bear no living children, though we have survived on this earth as long as human beings. We make our children as you and I were made, but some of those who are made should never have been. You will not hate me, will you?"

She pressed herself up against me, the softness and sweetness of her in no way less entrancing than it had been to my mortal senses. I bent down to her, tasting the perfume in her hair, catching the scent of that champagne-heady elixir--her blood and mine--dancing in her veins. Suddenly the confusion hit me and I was dizzied. An hour ago I was dead. Now I wasn't going to die at all! And the only person I'd have grieved to abandon had cheated that death and given me a new life. She was right to call me newborn. I knew nothing at all of my new nature, other than the mindbending beauty of the nightworld around me, and the music she made when she touched me; the taste of her skin and hair; and the taste of her immortal blood.

"Calli," I murmured, as we moved among the unknowing mortals. "There's one thing...actually lots of things..."

"I know what you were going to ask," she grinned up at me, her sharp little teeth glinting in the flicker of carlights. "For me...you know I was able to enjoy...the mortal rituals as well, with you... Even though the taking of blood is the true erotic sharing of our kind."

"Will I still be able to... Will I want to?"

She looked up at me.

"I knew another vampire who did. I didn't know that's what he was, because when we have shared a mortal's blood, we can pass for mortal, and I believe that we can share the delights of the physical with mortals, if we want to. Our spirits and our bodies are one now, as they never can be in the physical human realm. It's like...we're the angels or the devils, whatever we choose to be. For all of us, the sharing of the blood is the way to partake of the god within. And this truth mortals know, but they have misunderstood it even while they enshrined it in a faith they have died and killed for."

"Well," I sighed, feeling the Pacific wind blow right through me, "I think you'd better take this newborn home with you before the sun rises, and show me everything I don't know."

"That's only fair," she said softly, pulling me along the sidewalk so quickly that we were faster than the wind itself. "You taught me a thing or two when you were mortal."

"Calli, what about...when they wonder how I walked out of the hospital?" I asked.

"You know what happened to the curious cat?" she teased. "They probably can't figure it out, so they'll cover it up. They'll rearrange the hospital records if need be. They got too many emergencies all at once, there weren't enough doctors on call! Obviously you weren't dead--you got up and wandered out. And I--well, they didn't even know I was in the car--so of course I lived, as you can see!"

We flew, weightless, on through the endlessly fascinating night streets, across the Mission District towards home. I kept catching thoughts, scents, images from the people who brushed against us in our flight. It was intoxicating. I kept waiting for the end of this dream but it never came. Once, biting my lip with excitement, I tasted my own blood--mixed with hers--and I felt as if I would explode with pleasure. I tongued the little teeth that had begun to grow sharper since that nearly unconscious moment when she had put her wrist--or was it the cat's soft little paw--to my mouth, and said, Drink. Oh, delirious happiness. I wish I could be a cat, too, and leap right over the moon, because that's how incredible this feels.

Her green eyes were mischievous as she paused and regarded me. "But you can, of course," she smiled, a little cat smile. "Just think it, and you can do it. Just like you thought yourself out of the hospital."

"And if you really want to be the musician you were as a mortal, you can do that too!" Her mouth quirked at one corner, as if she mocked herself, or me. Then her habitual serious expression returned, the shadow of sadness behind it.

"But you know it won't be as simple to accomplish this when the daylight hours are mostly forbidden to us. We can move about during the day if we must; you've seen me do it. But we can't stay out in the sunlight, you know, like sunbathers! If you did that, you really would die, and I would not be able to bring you back."

"And then I really would mourn your death," she whispered.

"I would go into the sun, I would follow you. Without you, immortality would have no flavor. I may be selfish, Paul, but not so selfish that I would cling to immortality if it meant the loss of all that makes such existence meaningful."

I stood and stared at her. I was trembling with the enormity, the incomprehensible rapidity of the changes assaulting my senses. I had to go and be quiet somewhere; I had to drink blood--oh, what about that? Did it mean I had to kill people? I wanted to sit down, though in fact I wasn't tired at all. My mind was racing so fast I couldn't keep up with it.

"Shhh," Calli murmured, pulling me behind her. "My love, I will tell you and teach you all I know about our needs. I do not kill, I can't. The one who made me sometimes killed, but he said you don't have to, not unless you choose to. But it is a very great responsibility to take life, even if we are vampires. If you kill, whether you do it in rage, or out of mercy, or in love, or merely in thirst, remember that once you were mortal too. Remember your fear, your curiosity, your love, even in the face of death. Remember the mortal poet who wrote, 'Do not go

gentle into that good night.' He didn't want a gentle death; he wanted to fight it. If you are the bringer of death to mortals, look into their souls and give them the death that each deserves."

I stood wavering on my newfound feet, in truth newborn to life as I never had dreamed it. What could we do together? What would this new life be? Not yet the dread, the sorrow, the possibility that I might come to hate immortality. Now it was a great adventure--and I was going to share it with Calli.

The new world, all colors and vibration, disturbed and frightened and attracted me. But I was tired, or something. It hurt; it was not the pain of my death, not exactly, but it was pain.

"Come on," she said quietly, taking hold of me again. "It's time for you to drink from me a little more, and to rest. Morning will come and then we will sleep in each other's arms. When you wake up, tomorrow at sunset, I will still be there with you as I never could be before. And by then you will have shed most of the shadow of your death."

I gathered her familiar little body into my arms. She felt absolutely weightless, as though I could toss her yards into the air. As usual, she could hear my thoughts.

But you can, of course, she laughed in my mind.

And being a cat, I'll always land on my feet.

And before I could move, she'd streaked out of my arms and there she was, that big glowing black cat, her head to one side as she regarded me. And anyone who says that cats don't have facial expressions--you're wrong. Because there was Calli, Cat, my vampire love, and, you should excuse the expression, she was enough to make a cat laugh.

I thought, *Paul, you're a cat!* And I was! I saw the light in her green eyes, and I found my feet--big furry paws like a bobcat's, with tufts of fur between the toes--and I was off after her, down the street towards the Victorian house that would remain our shelter, our sacred earth. We left the mortal world to its own business, until the foghorns came calling over the City, calling us to our rightful domains in the silver evening light.

- The End -

["Catching Cat" is the first chapter in a novel about Paul and Calli. GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS 2 will continue this novel. It is currently being serialized in "Vampyres" on the mainframe computer network Bitnet.]

THE AWAKENING

Castle towers crumble grey and brooding
under a sky bleeding red
at sunset;
where purple shadows walk and glide
and a silhouette
black and thin as skeleton bones
passes to crypts below
where leaves toss and whirl
though no winds blow
to wake a sleeper in a crypt
topped by an effigy in marble
medieval, white-lipped.
They walk together as they walked
while they lived and thrived
long ago--a hundred lives
back before the curse of blood,
the dark desires of the night
drove them underground
away from men, away from mortals,
away from shunned yet longed for light.

Janet P. Reedman



OF WOODEN STAKES AND SILVER CROSSES

by

Diana Smith and Pat Dunn

"Lt. Columbo, Homicide."

The giant who had opened the door looked at the badge and nodded, stepping aside to admit the detective. Awed by the towering butler, Columbo trailed in unusual silence.

"The police, sir."

The man who turned was nearly as tall as the butler, perhaps six-foot-four to the giant's nearly seven feet. "Thank you, Liam," he said in a resonant voice. "Would you please notify Mrs. Tannek?"

The butler nodded, bowed slightly and left, closing the siding mahogany doors behind him.

"Nothing has been touched. When I found Peter, it was obvious he was dead."

The little man in the rumpled raincoat nodded, reaching for his notebook and pencil, while giving a look around the bookshelf-lined room. "That's fine, Doctor, uh, Tannek... Peter Driscoll was found where, exactly?"

"Right where he is now," Dr. Tannek said, pointing behind a massive oak desk. "Your homicide team has not arrived yet, and I saw no point in calling for an ambulance."

Columbo looked faintly surprised as he peered down at the corpse lying face down on the thick shag carpet. An overturned swivel chair lay near the man's feet, giving the only evidence of a violent struggle. Blood from the wound in Peter Driscoll's neck had soaked through the carpet to the undermatting beneath.

"That's a shame," Columbo commented, moving around the desk and kneeling beside the body. "You'll have to get this carpet replaced, wouldn't you say?"

"I suppose so," Tannek answered, watching as the police detective very deftly examined the body of his business partner.

"My wife's always going on about how hard it is to get bloodstains out of things," the detective remarked. "This looks like a very expensive carpet--that's a shame."

"Yes," Tannek said, lifting an eyebrow. "Lieutenant, the carpet is of secondary importance. This man was murdered in my home, while staying as my guest, and I'd like some information on who might have done such a thing..."

Columbo didn't reply at once, his attention caught by something clasped in the dead man's right hand. Then he squinted up at Tannek. "That's what I'd like to know, too, Doctor." He stood up, dusting his hands off, and added, "I'm afraid we'll have to leave everything here just as it is for a bit longer, until the lab boys can take photos and so on. But I can tell you that your friend seems to have been stabbed in the throat."

"I *had* noticed," Tannek said dryly.

Columbo ignored that, merely looking around the study. "Is there another room where we could go to have a little talk, until the others get here?"

"Yes, of course." Tannek led him to an elegantly appointed drawing room which spoke of quiet good taste. It was a perfect setting for the exquisitely beautiful woman who rose from her seat to greet them.

Columbo had met many beautiful women in his life, but none as deserving of

the term "breath-taking" as the raven-haired vision offering him a delicate hand. For a moment he felt as if he should click his heels and kiss her fingers.

"Varina, my heart, this is Lt. Columbo of the police. Lieutenant, my wife," Nicholas introduced.

"Lieutenant," she said, her sultry voice sending shivers of delight up his spine.

"My pleasure, Mrs. Tannek," he said, grasping her hand.

"Perhaps under other circumstances," Varina said, the sadness in her enormous black eyes chiding him.

Columbo looked abashed at that, immediately releasing her hand and clapping himself on the forehead. "Oh, jeez, ma'am--I'm sorry. This must be a terrific shock for you, with Driscoll being a friend and all. Did you know him long, if you don't mind me asking?"

"He was a business partner, but we have known him for approximately four years. Peter...was a good friend."

"Sir, the rest of the police have arrived," the butler announced. "I have shown them to the study."

"Yes, right, that's fine," Columbo said, "thank you very much." He looked apologetically at the Tanneks. "I'm gonna have to go back there for a minute--I hope you don't mind... Will you mind answering a few questions later?"

Nicholas said carefully, "We intend to cooperate fully, Lieutenant."

"Fine, thank you." The detective lifted a hand, then turned and went back to the study.

"Lieutenant, this is weird," was the greeting. "This guy's mouth has been sewn shut."

Columbo's eyebrows shot up. "Sewn shut? You mean--with needle and thread? Like you sew clothing?"

"That's about it," the forensic man commented. "Maybe he was killed by a tailor."

Columbo knelt by the dead man now on his back. The lips were indeed sewn shut. Bending over for a closer inspection, Columbo noticed slash marks on the neck as if someone had begun to sever the head. "Garlic," he said, straightening up. "I smell garlic."

"Maybe he ate Italian for his last meal," the photographer remarked to one of the uniformed policemen who laughed.

Columbo took out the penknife he used to trim the ends of his cigars and sliced the stitches closing the body's lips. He peered inside the mouth, then exchanged glances with the coroner's man. Slowly he removed something from the corpse's mouth.

"Garlic cloves," the other murmured, staring at them. "His mouth's been stuffed with them!"

"Why would anyone do that, I wonder?" Columbo said, half to himself.

"Lieutenant, this one's for the books," the photographer commented, all levity gone from his manner now. "One loony murderer, if you ask me."

Columbo stood up, moved aside. "Take care of things, will ya? I'd better go see the Tanneks again." He absently wrapped the two small buds of garlic in his handkerchief and stuffed them into the pocket of his raincoat.

The Tanneks were still in the drawing room, both seated on a richly upholstered sofa. Dr. Tannek had a comforting arm around his wife and he kept it there even when Columbo made his presence known.

"Mrs. Tannek, ma'am, I can see you're upset so I'll try to keep this brief. Mr. Driscoll was a guest, you said?"

"We hosted a party in honor of the new gallery. Due to final details for the opening, we invited Peter to spend the weekend," Varina said, her voice soft. "It was not unusual for Peter to stay here."

"Gallery--what was that, ma'am? One of those photo or painting places?"

"An art gallery," she confirmed. "*The Phoenix's Eye*, on Sunset Boulevard. Peter and my husband were co-owners of it, Lieutenant."

Columbo made a note of that. "Dr. Tannek, why do you suppose Mr. Driscoll was in your study last night?"



"I'm not certain," Nicholas said. "However, Peter knew his way around this house, and it was not unusual for him to get up in the middle of the night and do some work if he couldn't sleep."

"Did he suffer from insomnia?"

"I believe so."

"Ah." Columbo furrowed his brow. "Well, it's starting to look as if he was sitting in there going over some files or maybe on the telephone, and someone came in and..." he gestured with open palms. "There's no doubt he was killed right where he was found--excuse me, ma'am."

She inclined her head.

"But I wonder how someone could get into the study without either of you hearing anything?"

"The bedrooms on the second level act as insulation, Lieutenant. Our rooms are on the third level and are rather secluded. We value our privacy and maintain the entire level for our own use. Varina has her music room while I have a private gallery--no one is allowed in those rooms." Nicholas moved his arm from his wife's shoulders, but his hand sought hers.

"Really?!" Columbo looked vastly impressed. "Well, that's very interesting. You know, I'm always saying to my wife, I wish we had more space..." He broke off, raising his hand. "I'm sorry, you're probably not interested in my problems. Could I ask you one more thing?"

"Of course, Lieutenant."

"Why do you suppose someone would want to stab Mr. Driscoll and then sew up his mouth with garlic in it?"

Varina uttered a soft gasp, and her hand tightened in Nicholas's.

"I've no idea," the doctor said. "You don't seriously mean that--"

"I'm afraid so," the detective finished. "Well, we're just beginning here. I'm sure things will sort themselves out once we get the autopsy report. I'll be in touch." He turned to go, then halted in the doorway and turned back. "One last thing--I found a piece of broken glass in Mr. Driscoll's right hand--the reflecting kind, like you use in a mirror... Were there any mirrors in the study?"

"No, no mirrors," Nicholas said, a wry smile curving his lips. "The study is mine, and I have no need for a mirror while I'm working."

"Well, no, I suppose you don't," Columbo agreed, shoving one hand in a pocket of his rumpled raincoat. He pulled out the bundle of his handkerchief, looked at it and frowned. "Mrs. Tannek, one more thing--did you keep fresh garlic in your kitchen here? You didn't happen to notice if any was missing, did you?"

"Garlic?" Varina repeated. "I don't know, Lt. Columbo. Why do you ask?"

"I just wondered where this garlic came from, that's all."

"Perhaps the murderer brought it with him," Nicholas said.

"You know, that's probably right. Well, thank you. Goodbye."

"Goodbye, Lieutenant," Nicholas said, watching as the police investigator left.

"Oh, Nicholas, he's back!" Varina cried, fear shining in her luminous black eyes. "He meant to kill *you*, not Peter."

"Yes, my heart," Nicholas said gravely, "I'm afraid that is what happened."

"What are we going to do?"

"I'm not certain," he admitted. He looked up at the door as Columbo poked his head around it again. "Lieutenant?"

"Excuse me," the policeman said, forefinger scratching his eyebrow. "I just can't get this garlic out of my mind. Would you happen to know what the significance of it might be?" He looked at them keenly.

"No, Lt. Columbo," Nicholas said, returning his gaze. "I thought it was *your* job to explain the actions of madmen."

Columbo blinked, then nodded. "Sorry to bother you. I'll be going now."

"Very well," Nicholas said calmly.

Columbo hesitated, then withdrew once more.

"What an odd little man," Varina murmured.

"I suspect he could be a dangerous little man," Nicholas said with a frown.

"Dangerous?"

"Our secret, my heart."

"He will pry until he knows the truth," she guessed.

"It seems likely. I understand Columbo is very good at what he does, and rarely fails to solve a case or apprehend a criminal. Unless..." He paused, a furrow between his brows. "Unless I can capture Evan Jabez first..."

"Just tell Lt. Columbo who we suspect and let *him* deal with Jabez," Varina interrupted. "Surely he won't believe Jabez's theories about us and why you are his target. He seems a rational man and probably would believe Jabez a madman before he'd believe in vampires."

"Perhaps you're right," Nicholas said slowly. "We'll wait and see if they discover any additional clues. Then later we will tell Columbo we have remembered an instance of harassment by Jabez... Perhaps it will satisfy him."

Varina rubbed her upper arm in remembrance of the "harassment". "The New York Police have record of that incident."

"Yes, the good lieutenant could request that report. I do have a copy of it here, but it might be best to have Columbo get a copy he can be certain hasn't been tampered with," Nicholas said, looking thoughtful. "The report does state that Evan Jabez was sentenced to an institution for the criminally insane and that he believes himself a vampire hunter."

"And that alone would make him certifiable, for there are no such things as vampires," Varina said, wrapping her arms around her husband and resting her head against his chest.

"As everyone knows," he agreed with a laugh, kissing her temple.

*

Columbo sat at his desk, staring at the bagged pieces of evidence. There was a pattern, a carefully planned murder but the murderer's intent escaped him. A broken piece of mirror, garlic cloves, a slim wooden stake...

"Gee, Lieutenant, looks like a vampire hunter's tools of trade," a young detective said, looking down at the pieces of puzzle. "Ya got your stake to drive through the heart, garlic to ward him off. Report says the garlic was sewn in his mouth, right? That's classic vampire stuff, sir. Sew garlic in the mouth and sever the head so he can't come back."

Columbo turned an owlish gaze on the rookie detective. "Vampires? Like in the movies--Count Dracula and all that?"

"Sure," the other said. "But vampires go back in folklore for centuries, you know."

"Ah." Columbo considered. "Come back from where, exactly, Detective Briggs?"

"Sir?"

"You said they'd put garlic in a vampire's mouth and cut off his head to keep him from coming back..."

"Oh." Briggs shrugged, grinned. "From the dead, of course. Don't you ever watch Horror Midnight Classics?"

"Not if I can help it," Columbo replied, scratching his head. "That's an interesting theory, Briggs. What about the mirror?"

"A vampire doesn't have a reflection."

"But the victim *did* have one," Columbo objected. "So that means he couldn't have been a vampire--right?"

"Maybe, maybe not," Briggs said. "Look, Lieutenant, all the stories say that if you've been bitten by a vampire you eventually become one yourself when you die. Sometimes it's just one bite, sometimes three--amounts to the same thing. A vampire's victim is almost as much of a risk as a vampire. Maybe the killer wasn't taking any chances."

"Maybe," Columbo mused, fingers drumming on his desktop. "Not a bad theory... Except that vampires don't exist."

Briggs shook his head. "Your murderer might think they do."

Columbo nodded thoughtfully. "Kinda looks that way, doesn't it?" He picked

up the plastic bag containing the slim wooden stake. "I wonder why he chose Driscoll?"

"Maybe he didn't."

"Yeah. He was in the wrong place at the wrong time," Columbo surmised. "He was in Nicholas Tannek's study late at night. Now, who would you expect to see?"

"The owner of the house--that Tannek guy."

"Do me a favor, willya, Briggs?" Columbo said, standing up and heading for the coat rack where he'd left his raincoat. "Find out if Nicholas Tannek has ever been harassed by a vampire hunter."

"Sure thing, Lieutenant Columbo," Briggs said, grinning at the older man's matter-of-fact tone. "Hey, maybe you'd better take a silver cross along the next time you go see Tannek, huh?"

Columbo finished putting on his coat and turned back towards the detective. "Would a St. Christopher's medal do?"

Briggs shook his head and laughed, while Columbo gave a wave and left, calling over his shoulder, "I'll be at that art gallery of Tannek's if you need me."

*

"Are you certain about this young woman's talents? I truly find her paintings--disturbing," Varina was saying, frowning at a painting her husband was hanging.

"I'm seldom wrong, my heart," he replied, stepping back to admire the painting. "Ah, Lt. Columbo, tell me what you think."

Varina turned her head to see an astonished Columbo standing in the doorway, his hand lifted as though to knock. Smiling at him, she said, "Please come in, Lieutenant."

The policeman obeyed, still looking bemused. "Excuse me, Dr. Tannek--how did you know it was me out here?" He glanced around the carpeted, mirrorless gallery.

"Your cigar smoke is most distinctive," Nicholas informed him. "Most smokers are unaware of how the odor of smoke clings to them, permeates their clothing, hair, and even skin."

Columbo grinned sheepishly. "My wife says the same thing." He shook Nicholas's hand, then pointed at the painting. "Is this one of your artists?"

"She's very talented," Nicholas agreed. "We just got in a consignment of her work today."

Columbo tilted his head, peering at the abstract design. "Are you sure that's the way it goes?"

"You see, darling, the lieutenant agrees with me," Varina said triumphantly. "But it is your gallery, I suppose. There may be someone who likes this sort of thing and will buy it. I shouldn't like it in my home--would you, Lieutenant?"

Columbo considered the canvas in question, then shook his head. "My wife does all our decorating, Mrs. Tannek." He reached into his pocket for a cigar, then paused. "Er... Do you mind if I..."

"Not at all," Varina assured him.

"What brings you here, Lt. Columbo?" inquired Nicholas.

The detective didn't answer at once, taking some moments to light his cigar. Then he looked up and said, "Well, I was just wondering why your friend and business partner should be murdered in *your* home, at *your* desk, Dr. Tannek. Then it occurred to me that maybe the murderer thought he was *you*."

Nicholas and Varina exchanged glances.

"Do you have any enemies, Doctor? This wasn't a random attack by a burglar or someone; this was a premeditated, planned murder. The killer brought along certain items, and so on. Who do you suppose might want to harm you?" Columbo focused his attention on Nicholas, his expression curious.

"Let's go in the office," Nicholas said, putting one arm around Varina and leading the way to a large and superbly decorated back room. Even to Columbo's eye it was obvious that the same decorator who had done this office had also done Tannek's home. He was no expert, but he'd guess that Varina Tannek was the

decorator in both cases.

"You must understand this is somewhat embarrassing," Nicholas said, sitting at the desk and motioning for Columbo to have a seat. Varina perched on the arm of her husband's chair, draping one arm across his shoulder.

"Embarrassing, sir? How is that?"

"We have been plagued by--well, a madman. He tried to kill us back in New York and we thought we'd escaped him in coming out here. For some reason he has decided we must be destroyed."

"And why is that, Dr. Tannek?"

"He thinks we're--this is ridiculous, but Evan Jabez labors under the delusion that we are vampires."

"That's very interesting," Columbo said after a long moment. "I thought it might be something like that."

Varina lifted an eyebrow. "You believe us, then?"

Columbo shrugged. "I don't suppose you'd make up such an...explanation if it wasn't true. We can get the New York City police report... You *did* call the police, Dr. Tannek, about Mister...Jabez, was it?"

"Evan Jabez, and yes, we did make a police report," Nicholas affirmed. "We tried to deal with him on our own but he's quite mad."

"He's obsessed with the notion and is determined to kill us. What he doesn't seem to understand is that a stake through the heart would kill anyone, vampire or not. That is, if vampires did exist," Varina said, smiling at Columbo.

"Er...right," he agreed. "*If* they did. But since there are no such things as vampires, then it's kinda strange that this Jabez believes in them, isn't it?"

"People believe many strange things, Lieutenant," Nicholas said.

"Hm," the detective nodded. "Have you got a description of Mr. Jabez?" He'd double-check it with the New York report, of course, but he wanted to see how cooperative the Tanneks were going to be.

"He's a wicked little man," Varina said with a sniff of disgust.

"I believe the good lieutenant wishes a more detailed description, my heart," her husband said, placing a hand on her thigh. "So he knows what to look for."

"I have tried to forget what he looks like," Varina told the lieutenant. "He nearly killed my Nicholas."

"I see." Columbo frowned, studied his cigar smoke. "I don't suppose you'd like to tell me why he thinks you're...er, vampires."

Varina looked at Nicholas. "I'm sure we haven't the slightest idea. We've done nothing to him!"

"Without provocation, Lieutenant," Nicholas added as Columbo opened his mouth.

"Do you know anything about vampires, Lieutenant?" Varina asked, standing up and walking to the window. Sunlight streamed in, making her hair shine like polished ebony.

Columbo blinked at her for a moment, then said, "Only what I see in the movies, ma'am. My wife likes that actor, what's-his-name, Bela Lugosi... I don't know why; it must be the cape..." He glanced at the carpet before Varina, frowning a little, then went on. "Ah, I think vampires drink blood or something like that. Turn into bats, sleep in coffins--that sort of thing. Am I right?"

"I've heard those things, too," Varina said, smiling at him. "Silly superstition, I would think."

"Yeah, silly."

"Why, one of the most well-known facts is that vampires are allergic to sunlight and spend the daytime hours sleeping in a coffin. What do you see, Lieutenant?" Varina asked, hand spread towards the sunlight.

"I sure don't see a vampire," Columbo said, scratching his head. "But this Jabez guy does. Hasn't he seen you in the daytime?"

Varina gave a graceful shrug. "He has decided that we have found a way to circumvent that problem. We have tried many times to convince him he is mistaken but..." She trailed off, giving a little shrug of her shoulders.

"He continues to persist," Nicholas finished.

"I see," commented Columbo. "Excuse me for asking, but why haven't you sued

him for defamation of character or whatever?"

Nicholas sounded irritated. "The last I knew of Evan Jabez, Lieutenant, he was in police custody for assaulting my wife with a wooden stake. I was told he'd be in the insane asylum rather a long time. I didn't think I'd need to bring additional legal action."

"From what you've told me, I'd say it's a good bet he's our suspect," Columbo said, standing up. "I'll leave you to your paintings and see what I can dig up on Evan Jabez. Ma'am," he said in farewell, tilting his head in Varina's direction.

"Thank you, Lt. Columbo," she said, with the faintest hint of a queen dismissing a retainer who had pleased her. Her sincere gaze held his eyes for a long moment.

He eventually cleared his throat. "Yeah. Right...goodbye, then." He glanced at the carpet again, then nodded in Nicholas's direction and went towards the doorway.

He paused there and looked around. "Dr. Tannek, you and Mr. Driscoll weren't having any disagreements about how to run the business, were you?"

"Certainly not," Nicholas answered. "Why?"

"Just curious," the detective said, half to himself. He seemed about to comment further, then thought better of it and left with a wave.

Varina looked at her husband. "It'll be all right," she said.

"I wonder," he mused. "His last question troubles me."

Varina sat on his lap, looping her arms around his neck. "About you and Peter?"

"He has not accepted our story about Jabez. I believe he is considering the notion that I killed Peter..."

"But we have told the truth!" she interrupted. "Jabez *did* threaten us, and he *is* the murderer. I'm certain of it. All Columbo has to do is find him."

Nicholas smiled sadly. "I hope it will be that simple, Varina. Columbo might conclude we are too anxious to blame Jabez, that this is a...how do they call it...a setup."

"Nonsense," she said confidently. "I've taken care of things."

Nicholas smiled at that. "Perhaps so, my heart, but we must be on our guard. Columbo is no fool, despite his facade."

"A facade?" She considered the idea. "It's a very *good* one."

*

Columbo gazed off into the distance, ignoring what his dog was doing on the other end of the leash and concentrating on the Driscoll case. Briggs had found the report on Evan Jabez, and the particulars supported Dr. Tannek's story. Jabez had been released from his mental hospital six months ago, and his current whereabouts were unknown. Everything seemed to point to him as the culprit for Peter Driscoll's death. Except...something wasn't quite right.

The lieutenant stared down as his basset hound nosed his inattentive hand, then began wrapping its leash around his legs. The shadows of man and dog were indistinguishable.

"That's it," Columbo murmured, pausing in his efforts to untangle them. "Mrs. Tannek didn't have a shadow!"

The dog looked up, unimpressed.

"Come on," Columbo told him, heading back to the battered sports car he drove in defiance of good taste.

The dog accompanied his master, used to erratic changes in direction. He curled up on the seat next to Columbo, waiting patiently for whatever his master had planned.

"Now, how could that be, dog? Everybody's got a shadow," Columbo said, starting the car. "I mean, even a thing has a shadow, but Mrs. Tannek didn't. I'm sure of that. Didn't notice Dr. Tannek, but she stood right in front of the window. That's another thing--vampires can't go out in sunlight, yet she stood right in it. He was out, too. I went to their house in the middle of the morning, the gallery in the afternoon."

The basset hound yawned and dropped its head on its paws, clearly untroubled.
"Yeah, that's what I thought, too," Columbo said, scratching the dog's head while waiting for the traffic light to change. Maybe it would be better for everyone if this turned out to be one of his unsolved cases.
He sighed and drove forward as the light changed. That wasn't his way. He'd better go have another talk with the Tanneks.

*

The giant butler informed Columbo that "Madam" was teaching her class at UCLA and Dr. Tannek was unavailable.
"Teaching? What does Mrs. Tannek teach?" Columbo asked.
"Music, sir."
"Oh." He thought about that, then said, "Well, I don't want you to disturb Dr. Tannek if he's in the bath or something. Thank you."
It took him some time to track down his quarry and when he did, he found her talking with a handful of students after class.
"I think you're wrong about Mozart," she was saying to a young man. "He was more complex than many biographers have given him credit for being. His music demonstrates this, surely. Much of it is joyous, but there is a great melancholy in it as well."
"Your classes are so popular because you make it all seem so real, like you really knew these people," a serious young woman said.
"I do know them," Varina smiled. "Through their music--as you can know them."
Columbo waited until the students left, then approached her. "Hello, Mrs. Tannek. I hope you don't mind my stopping in like this--your butler said I might find you here."
"Of course not, Lieutenant. It's nice to see you again. Is there news of Jabez?"
"Well, no, ma'am, I'm afraid not. I just wanted to ask a few questions, if that's all right."
"Nicholas and I have sworn to help all we can," she said, gathering up sheet music. "Do you mind if I clean up? There's another class due in here shortly."
Columbo apologized profusely and waited out in the corridor until she came out of the classroom. Walking along beside her, he said, "I couldn't help overhearing you a little bit back there. What musical instruments do you play?"
"Quite a few, actually. I have a large collection of antique instruments, many no longer known to the general public. Not only do I teach music appreciation, but I demonstrate the instruments and pass on the skill to those who show interest. But I am certain that's not why you sought me out, Lieutenant. You said you had questions?"
"That's right," Columbo admitted. "It was something Dr. Tannek said the other day, about Evan Jabez."
"Oh, yes?" She looked at him coolly.
"Well, he said that Jabez was institutionalized after attacking *you*, ma'am. But I've read the New York police report and according to that, Jabez was arrested for attacking your husband." He scratched his head, shrugged. "I'm just a little bit confused here, Mrs. Tannek."
She smiled at that. "Well, the report doesn't mention my attack because I convinced Nicholas not to call the police. Jabez *said* he was mistaken and promised not to harass us further. Obviously, he lied."
"But why wouldn't your husband tell me Jabez attacked him?"
"You must understand Nicholas, Lieutenant. His own attack was not important to him while the attack on myself meant everything to him. What the report did not mention was that I stepped between my husband and Jabez to prevent injury to Nicholas. So you see why that stands out in his mind," Varina said, pausing in the parking lot and looking around at him.
Columbo gazed into her eyes, then nodded. "That makes sense. If Mrs. Columbo were to get hurt because of me...well, I sure would feel bad if anything

like that were to happen." He was silent, then nodded. "Thanks, Mrs. Tannek. That clears it up."

"I was certain a man as sensitive as yourself would understand," she said, putting a hand on his arm.

He looked surprised, then rather embarrassedly patted her hand. "Jabez must be a real lunatic. Imagine believing in vampires!"

"Yes, just imagine. Did you have any more questions, Lieutenant? If so, you may follow me to the gallery where I'm meeting Nicholas," she suggested as a chauffeur-driven limousine pulled up. Columbo noted with surprise that the butler was now chauffeur. The giant took Mrs. Tannek's portfolio and held the limousine door open for her.

"Yeah... All right, I'll do that," Columbo answered, watching as she got into the limousine. He turned towards his own car, glancing up at the late afternoon sky as he went. When he looked down, he was frowning. "Shadows," he muttered, unlocking the door on the driver's side.

*

Thanks to traffic, Varina had time to fill Nicholas in before the police lieutenant arrived at the gallery. "I'm certain he merely wishes to be thorough," Varina said when Nicholas frowned at the news.

"We can't afford to have him be *too* thorough, Varina," he reminded her, pacing the length of the gallery office. "If we're not careful, the next thing you know he'll be wanting to inspect the shipments. Our special crates came today, and he mustn't see the contents. He isn't ready to accept--"

"How can we convince him of our innocence? The truth is that Evan Jabez killed Peter because he believed he was killing either a vampire or a vampire's 'victim'. Jabez is the murderer."

"That's right, ma'am," Columbo said from the doorway, hands in the pockets of his raincoat.

"How nice to see you again, Lieutenant," Nicholas said, turning towards him. "Varina said you had some more questions..."

"Yessir. I hope you don't mind me barging in like this. I sure don't want to interrupt anything, but I couldn't help noticing--Mrs. Tannek doesn't seem to have a, well, a shadow."

"Shadow?" Nicholas repeated, lifting an eyebrow.

"A shadow's kinda like a reflection, wouldn't you say?"

"I hadn't really given it much thought," Nicholas said, exchanging a glance with Varina.

"You must be mistaken, Lieutenant," Varina said, dark eyes narrowed. "Of course I have a shadow--what a ridiculous notion."

"No, ma'am, I don't think so," he answered politely. "I noticed it the other day when you were standing in front of that window, and again this afternoon in the parking lot. You see, at this time of the year, shadows are usually pretty long--I called up the weatherman at the TV station and checked on that. But you don't cast one, do you see?"

"Nicholas?" Varina said in a pleading tone, turning to her husband.

He lifted a hand, but spoke without taking his attention from Columbo. "Even assuming this absurd notion of yours is correct, Lieutenant, what do you expect to gain by coming here and telling us about it?"

Columbo kept one hand securely in his raincoat pocket. With the other hand he gestured fatalistically. "That's a good question, Dr. Tannek. I guess I'd have to say--the truth. I hate a mystery." He shrugged and added, "Don't get me wrong. I don't think you killed Mr. Driscoll or anything."

"That's something, at any rate," Nicholas said dryly.

"Then what does it matter whether or not I have a shadow?" Varina asked, advancing on the police lieutenant.

"Now Mrs. Tannek, I don't want to hurt you," Columbo cautioned, pulling his clenched hand from his pocket.

"Hurt me?" Varina echoed, now at arm's length from him.

Columbo whipped up his hand and held it before him.

Varina blinked and began laughing.

Columbo, stunned by her reaction, glanced hastily at the silver and black crucifix on the rosary wrapped around his fist.

"Where did you get *that*, Lieutenant?" asked Varina, pointing at the rosary.

"I borrowed it from my wife's mother," he said bemusedly. "Briggs *said* it would work--you mean it's not true about..." He trailed off foolishly.

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant, I didn't mean to offend you," Varina said, taking the rosary from him and examining it. "It's really quite lovely but the silver needs to be polished."

"Boy, do I feel stupid," he said, placing a hand melodramatically on his head. "I'm sorry, ma'am, I thought..." he broke off, shook his head, "Well, never mind about that. It's plain I was wrong."

"So it would seem," Varina said, returning the rosary.

"But I'm still puzzled about your shadow--lack of one, I mean. And just why Jabez is so certain you're vampires," Columbo persisted.

Varina looked exasperated, but Nicholas spoke with a hint of amusement. "And if I should tell you we *are* vampires, Lieutenant, would that satisfy your curiosity? What would you do about it? Arrest us?"

Lt. Columbo was nonplused at that. "You know, Doctor, I'm pretty sure there's no statute on the books against being a vampire. That's probably because they're only mythical creatures..." He frowned and added, "Aren't they?"

"Have you ever met one?" Nicholas asked.

The policeman thought that over, taking his time as he returned the rosary to his pocket. "I don't know," he said at last, honestly. "I thought maybe I had."

"What would you do, Lieutenant, if you met such a being?" Varina asked, voice low and sultry.

He scratched his head. "Well ma'am, I just don't know. Do you think it's likely to happen?"

"Anything is possible," she replied, putting her hand on his arm.

"You know, I've got a problem with this case. I need proof of Jabez's guilt before I can arrest him."

"Would a confession help?" Nicholas asked, brow wrinkled in thought.

"You have an idea, beloved?" Varina asked, turning to him and grasping his hand.

"We know Jabez killed Peter and we know why. The problem seems to be in proving it to the court's satisfaction. If we can get him to confess to the lieutenant, it would solve the problem, would it not?"

"You know, that's not such a bad idea," Columbo said, brows knitted together as he considered the notion. "And I think a confession would be just the thing. Do you suppose you could help me get one?"

"Perhaps," said Nicholas, his expression enigmatic. "We must locate Jabez first."

"He will try again," Varina said, her voice stark. "Peter was not the target and Jabez will strike again. After all, this was not his first attempt to murder us."

"He is obsessed with us," Nicholas agreed. "And in his obsession he may grow careless."

"Which would make my job easier," Columbo said.

"I will not allow you to set yourself up as a decoy," Varina said to her husband. "I will not take the chance he might succeed."

Before Nicholas could reply, a beep sounded from Columbo's raincoat pocket. "Could I use your telephone?"

"Certainly, Lieutenant." The doctor waved at the phone on his desk, then moved aside to converse with Varina in hushed tones.

"Columbo here. Yeah, Briggs... You did? That's great! Right, give me the address..." He pulled out a memo book, then patted himself until he found a pencil. "Yeah...got it. Thanks!"

He hung up and looked at the Tanneks. "We've found where Jabez is rooming. I'm on my way to check it out. Look--we'll be in touch, all right?" He nodded in

Varina's direction. "Goodbye, Mrs. Tannek."

When he had gone, she turned to Nicholas. "You know I don't mean to insult you, beloved, or imply that you cannot take care of yourself, but we have confronted this madman before and he nearly killed you--"

"You conveniently forgot that you took the crossbow bolt meant for me," he interrupted. "You worry about my safety but neglect your own. From that first day in the prison cell you have been more important to me than anyone, and I will do whatever I must to protect you. If need be, I *will* assist the good lieutenant in trapping Jabez by acting as decoy. Neither one of us is safe as long as he roams free."

"Then *you* must accept my assistance," she said, wrapping her hands around one of his. "I came to this life to be with you, and without you there *is* no life."

Nicholas brought her hands to his lips, and caressed her knuckles with kisses. "I still do not know what I did to earn God's blessing, but I thank Him with all my heart for giving you to me."

"You were and always will be my knight," she said, wrapping her arms around his neck and rubbing her cheek against his.

*

Columbo stood in the middle of the cheap boarding house room and stared in amazed disbelief at the decor. Bulbs of garlic hung at the windows and silver crucifixes were nailed on the walls.

"Lieutenant, look at this!"

He turned to see Briggs holding up a crossbow and handful of silver-tipped bolts. The younger detective was kneeling by a trunk and Columbo wandered over to inspect the contents.

"What is it?" Columbo asked, staring down at the jumble of paraphernalia in the steamer trunk. "Well, would you look at that!"

Crosses, wooden stakes, glass vials of water each marked with a silver cross on the stopper, several mallets, dozens of rosaries... "Everything the well-stocked vampire hunter needs," Briggs said, shaking his head. "This guy really thinks he's Van Helsing, doesn't he?"

"Kinda looks that way," Columbo agreed, reaching into the trunk and pulling out a small book.

"What do you want us to do with this stuff?" Briggs asked when the lieutenant sat on a lumpy brown sofa.

"Hmm? Oh, get pictures of all this and then book it as evidence," Columbo replied in an absent-minded tone. He was busy thumbing through the book, absorbed in the tortured words he found scrawled on the pages.

Jabez truly believed what he wrote, convinced it was his holy duty to rid the world of vampiric evil. The Tanneks were not his first targets, only his most recent and most obsessive.

"There's enough here for a warrant, arrest, and conviction," Columbo murmured, turning pages. Not only did Jabez present his "evidence" to justify murder, but he detailed his every move and even wrote raptuously of the demise of his so-called vampires and their victims.

Suddenly he bolted up from the sofa, stuffing the diary in his pocket and dashing for the door.

"Sir..."

"Get a unit--no, two--over to the Tanneks'," he called over his shoulder.

*

The Tannek home was quiet when he arrived. A few lights shone out into the darkness. Columbo got out of his car as quickly as he could, casting glances all around the driveway and shrubbery. He started for the front door, trying to ignore the prickling sensation on the back of his neck. Jabez had been very explicit about what he planned, and it wasn't pleasant.

Columbo's uneasiness increased when he found the front door standing ajar and

no sign of the giant butler. Heart in his throat, he crept up to the study where he expected to find Nicholas Tannek's decapitated body lying in a pool of blood. He was relieved to find the study empty and quite neat. No sign of a struggle of any sort... Something crunched under his foot and he looked down to see a bulb of garlic lying on the carpet.

The house was too still, he thought with a shudder.

A sound behind him warned him just in time, and he ducked as a club whistled past his head. Whirling around, he pulled his revolver from its holster.

"Lieutenant?"

His attacker was the butler who looked the worse for wear. Blood trickled from a gash in the man's forehead and one eye was swollen shut.

"Help's on the way," Columbo said. "Is everything all right here?"

"Mr. Jabez came here just before sunset," the servant said. "I found him in the study. He tried to force me to tell him where 'the coffins' were hidden. We struggled--he escaped."

"And Doctor and Mrs. Tannek?"

"I don't know."

The starkness of his tone told Columbo that the man was more than a servant to the Tanneks, that he cared for the couple on a deeper level. Pulling the diary from his pocket, the detective said, "Jabez was planning to confront them in their 'lair', to destroy them completely. He mentions fire as the final stage."

"Oh my lady," Liam moaned, covering his face with his hands. "I have failed her!"

Columbo was shocked at the sight of the man's weeping, and he stuffed the diary back in his pocket and pretended he hadn't noticed. "Have you searched the house yet?"

"Nay, I was beginning with this room," Liam said, taking a deep breath and straightening his shoulders.

"I was told the entire third floor is their private domain," Columbo continued, rubbing his chin. "That would be like a lair, wouldn't it? I mean, to someone like Jabez."

"Aye, it could," Liam agreed, scowling at the detective.

"I think under the circumstances, the Tanneks wouldn't mind if I took a look around," the detective suggested, heading for the large curving staircase in the main foyer.

The big man was stock still for a moment, then was beside Columbo in a few long strides. "Very well, Lieutenant, if you think it will do any good, then I will guide you upstairs." He hesitated as if he was going to say something else, then turned and led Columbo up the staircase.

The detective followed meekly. Columbo was aware that if the butler had opted to deny him the privilege of conducting a search, that would have been that. It was better to have the man--*Liam?*--on his side.

The third floor was as deserted as the rest of the house. Columbo trailed after Liam, their footfalls silent on the thick carpet. The corridors were decorated with many paintings on the walls and the occasional sculpture on a pedestal, set in a niche or corner. Much of the art Columbo saw appeared to be of the modern variety, the kind that reminded him of his nephew's fingerpaintings. He paused before one framed lithograph and frowned, wondering what was wrong. Then he saw that it was not protected by glass, as artwork of that sort often was. "No reflection," he murmured under his breath.

Liam halted before a door. "Wait here, sir." He opened it cautiously and entered.

After a minute or two, Columbo peered around the door. "What is it?"

"Mrs. Tannek is not here," Liam said, not looking at the policeman. "Jabez has taken her with him."

Columbo's sharp gaze surveyed the room, noting the signs of disturbance: the bedclothes were rumpled, a vase lay overturned on a dresser, a chair on its side. He approached the bed and touched the pillow. It was damp, as though water had been sprinkled over it. Holy water?

"We'd better notify Dr. Tannek," Columbo said.

"He... He went to his gallery," Liam said, righting the vase and then the chair. "There was a phone call--a problem at the gallery. Dr. Tannek didn't wish to go but Madam insisted."

"Conveniently leaving her vulnerable," Columbo said thoughtfully. "Not to say you aren't a fine bodyguard," he added hastily.

"No, you are correct," Liam said stiffly. "I allowed my lady to be taken from this house and now her life is in danger. I knew this madman was about and threatening both the master and my lady, yet I did not take enough precautions. My guard was down and the madman overpowered me with some sort of gas, then used a club to make certain I did not interfere."

"I bet that phone call was a set-up to get Dr. Tannek out of the house. See, look at this entry," Columbo said, getting out the diary and thumbing through the pages of the later entries. "Jabez knows that Mrs. Tannek is the doctor's weakness--threaten her to force him to do whatever you want. 'Once I have the demoness in my power, the vampire will do my bidding.' That's what it says."

"My lady is *not* a demoness!" Liam protested, glaring at the book.

"No, of course not," Columbo said, putting Jabez's journal away in his pocket. But he seemed preoccupied. "Well, he wouldn't have taken her to his apartment--he'd want to keep that a secret from people, especially if he thought they could use supernatural powers to break in and murder him in his bed..."

Liam was looking truculent.

"So he must have another hide-out," Columbo went on, moving to the bedroom window and looking out. "Good, the boys in uniform are here. Let's go."

Right behind the patrol units came Nicholas Tannek, his face a dark thundercloud. "Liam!" he bellowed.

Liam lifted his chin and went to face his furious master.

One look at the butler's injuries told Nicholas what had happened.

"I am sorry, master, but..."

"Never mind, Liam," Nicholas said, his shoulders slumping. "It's as much my fault--I should have never fallen for that trick. There was no problem at the gallery; it was merely a ruse to separate us."

Just then, an alarm began to sound. "Fire!" Liam cried, turning to run for the basement.

"Leave it!" Nicholas rasped.

Liam halted, astonished. "Sir, the house--"

"Don't you see?! He wants us to waste time here while he takes Varina and..." He broke off, struggling to control himself.

"Get the fire department out here," Columbo said to a nearby policeman. "Use your radio--it's quicker!" To the others he added, "Dr. Tannek's right. Jabez meant this as a diversionary tactic. But I don't think he'll kill her, sir. Not until you get there."

"Where?" roared Nicholas.

Columbo scratched his head. "Well, he must have left a clue since he's using her as a lure to get you."

"A greenhouse," Nicholas said abruptly. "Where better to kill a vampire? Keep him there long enough and the sunlight will stream in and--poof!"

"Vampire?" one of the uniformed officers said in amazement. "You chasing vampires now, Lieutenant?"

"Ah, no, officer," Columbo said hurriedly. "The man we're after is a murderer, kidnaper, and arsonist. On the side he kills people he thinks are vampires."

The patrolman whistled. "Nutcase, huh?"

"An extremely dangerous one," Nicholas said, impatient with the conversation. "He has kidnapped my wife and intends to murder us both. We are wasting valuable time, Lieutenant! If you have any idea where he has taken her, we should be rescuing her, not discussing vampires!"

"Do you have a greenhouse on your property, sir? He won't have taken her far, or covered his tracks completely since he *wants* you to find them," Columbo pointed out. "He's using Mrs. Tannek as bait to trap you."

"Lieutenant, if he has harmed my wife, you will have another homicide on your

hands," Tannek promised, barely able to suppress his fury.

"Watch it, mister," the uniformed policeman said.

Columbo held up a hand. "The greenhouse, sir? If you don't mind--"

"We do have one," Liam interjected. "I'll take you, Lieutenant." He glanced anxiously at his employer, knowing that Nicholas meant his threat, and would most assuredly carry it out if need be.

"Let's go," Columbo agreed.

"No, Liam, you stay here and wait for the fire department," Nicholas commanded. "You know what items need to be saved, if at all possible."

Liam didn't like the arrangement, but he knew better than to argue with his employer, especially when Nicholas was on a rampage over Varina's safety.

"This way," Nicholas said, leading Columbo to a drawing room. He opened a set of French doors, crossed a patio that circled the entire back of the house, ran down cement steps two at a time and then led Columbo to a path that meandered through a formal garden. The greenhouse glittered like silver in the moonlight and Nicholas paused on the pathway, staring at the glass building.

"She is in there," he said softly, almost as if his steady gaze could penetrate the darkness and see inside the darkened building.

"Well, the odds are--"

"She is in there."

"All right, Doctor, if you say so," Columbo shrugged. He turned and spoke quietly with the policeman who had accompanied them, gesturing at the sides of the structure. The officers nodded and began to move around to the greenhouse's rear.

Columbo said, "We'll wait here until... Dr. Tannek, where are you going?!"

"To get my wife out of there," Nicholas snarled, walking towards the entrance of the greenhouse.

"Dr. Tannek, I don't think... Sir, come back here!" Columbo hissed, grabbing the back of Nicholas's jacket. "You're walking into a trap!"

"I know that, Columbo," Nicholas said, jerking free as he turned to face the detective. "But he has Varina, and I must--"

"I'm sure you think so, but you won't help her if Jabez puts an arrow through your heart." Columbo nodded, seeing he had Nicholas's attention. "We found crossbows and so forth in his hotel room. I doubt he's unarmed."

"Yes, he favors a crossbow," Nicholas said, frowning at the lieutenant. "But *you* must understand that my Varina's life is more important that my own. She *is* my life, my heart and soul."

Coming from anyone else's lips, such a proclamation would have sounded corny but it was spoken with such sincerity and meaning that it sounded perfectly natural. "And how would Mrs. Tannek feel if you got yourself killed while rescuing her?" Columbo asked, suspecting she felt as strongly about her husband as he felt about her.

"She would be furious," Nicholas agreed, smiling slightly. "My lady has often put herself in danger on my behalf."

"That's right--she stepped between you and Jabez when he was going to shoot you in New York," Columbo recalled.

"I commend you on the depth of your research, Lieutenant," Nicholas said, stepping back and craning his neck to look up at the greenhouse's roof. "If you can assist me with that ladder, I shall attempt to climb up and see if I can find Varina's location."

"Up on the roof?"

"Exactly, Lieutenant," Tannek confirmed, amazingly silent as he settled the ladder against the wall. "The roof is glass so I should have a clear view of the interior. I imagine he has a lantern of some sort to illuminate the area where he is waiting."

"I suppose so," Columbo said dubiously, following the doctor and standing at the base of the ladder. "Well, look, I'll hold this for you, if that'll help. But do you really think this is necessary?"

"Yes," was Nicholas's succinct answer, as he began to climb.

"Lieutenant?"

Columbo turned to speak with the police officer, whispering that the doctor

was reconnoitering.

"Lieutenant?"

Nicholas's soft but clear voice sounded above their heads, and Columbo and the officer looked up to see Tannek looking over the edge of the roof at them. "Sir?"

"Bring your men around to the north entrance," Nicholas instructed. "He is armed with a single-shot crossbow and once he has released it, he will be unarmed for a few seconds. I shall distract him, giving your men time to apprehend him."

"And Mrs. Tannek?"

"He has chained her to a roof support, and piled wood around her feet."

"Whatever for?"

"He plans to burn my wife at the stake."

"Good Lord," Columbo murmured, one hand going to his forehead. His cases usually weren't so...dramatic. "Well, you heard him, Officer," he said to the patrolman. "Get the others to the north door. Dr. Tannek," he added, as the man nodded and left, "just what sort of distraction were you..." He trailed off, realizing Nicholas was no longer visible. "Sir? Dr. Tannek?"

Whatever Nicholas had planned, Columbo realized he'd better join his men at the north entrance because it was about to happen.

The detective hurried around the corner just as the sound of shattering glass broke the hushed silence. When Columbo and his team burst into the greenhouse they found Jabez scrambling across the floor towards another armed crossbow.

As Nicholas had stated, Varina Tannek was bound with chains to a support with straw and wood piled around her feet. Jabez had also gagged her to prevent her calling out to her husband and all she could do was struggle futilely to free herself.

"No!" Jabez screamed when Nicholas brought a firm foot down on his hand, holding him pinned to the floor. "No no no!"

Uniformed officers swarmed over him, efficiently subduing the frenzied vampire killer. "You're making a mistake! *They* are the ones you should be arresting! I have done a service to mankind, eliminating vampires and making the world safer. You must not interfere before I complete my job!"

Columbo stood staring up at the hole in the glass roof, then looked at Nicholas who was removing his wife's gag. The man appeared to be uninjured, yet is was apparent that he had broken the glass and then leaped down from the roof.

"Nicholas, we must hurry! He's planted bombs!" Varina warned as soon as the gag was removed.

"Never make it!" Jabez crooned, giggling. "No keys. You can save yourself, but your demoness dies!"

Several padlocks held the chains securing around Varina. "Get out," Columbo ordered his team. "Send for the bomb squad--"

"No time. Never get her out," Jabez said gleefully as he was led away.

"I'm afraid he's right, Dr. Tannek," Columbo said, inspecting the padlocks. "Without keys, we'll never--"

"Lieutenant, you'd better leave," Nicholas said, his gaze on Varina. "I shall see to my wife."

"I'll do whatever I can to help," Columbo said, looking up at the ceiling. "Can we knock down the support? Take her out chains and all?"

"Not without bringing the entire roof down on us," Nicholas replied, testing the strength of the chains. "Lieutenant, please leave. I don't wish us responsible for your death. If I cannot free her, then I shall die with her."

"Nicholas!"

Smiling sadly, he cupped her face in his hands. "Did you think I would willingly live without you, my heart? After all these years together, I have no wish to return to that loneliness from which you rescued me. If death is to claim you, then it claims us both."

"Doctor, there must be something we can do!" Columbo insisted, refusing to allow Jabez to win.

"If you leave us alone, I might be able to free her," Nicholas said, after a hesitation.

"If there's a chance, then do it!"

"Nicholas, if you can't, then you must go with the lieutenant. Please. I don't want you to die," Varina pleaded, eyes strangely dry. She gave the impression of weeping, but there were no tears.

Nicholas looked at her, then at Columbo. It was obvious the police lieutenant would not leave. "We live or die together, my heart. I will have it no other way." He took a padlock in his hands and began to twist.

"Doc, that won't... work," Columbo began to protest, watching in amazement as the padlock broke.

"You begin unwinding the chains," Nicholas instructed, selecting another padlock. "Just enough to free her is all we need."

Columbo blinked, then gamely did as he was told. He worked alongside Nicholas at a feverish pace, pulling the chains down and away from the captive Varina until they were piled around her feet and Nicholas was able to scoop her up in his arms. She put her arms around his neck and clung to him.

"Let's get out of here," Columbo suggested, even as he turned for the doorway. He did not want to even *think* about what he had seen--until he had the time to ponder it without worrying about bomb explosions.

"Everyone back!" Nicholas commanded, and much to Columbo's amazement, the officers obeyed. He was a few steps in front of the Tanneks when the first explosion rent the air. The force of the blow sent him to his knees, but a firm hand grasped the back of his coat and pulled him to his feet. Even with Varina in his arms, Dr. Tannek managed to maneuver the stunned man out of harm's way.

More fire trucks arrived on scene, but Nicholas did not care about the burning structures, the loss of property. "Master?" He looked around to find Liam approaching.

"The house has suffered little damage," the servant informed him. "The fire was concentrated in the basement but the sprinkler systems managed to keep it under control until the fireman arrived. Is Madam--"

"Fine, Liam," she assured him, still in her husband's arms. "Nicholas and the lieutenant were wonderful."

Columbo looked rather embarrassed at that. "I didn't do much, Mrs. Tannek. Your husband here is the real hero. That was some trick you did with the locks, sir."

Nicholas gave him a suspicious look, but Columbo went on, "Well I guess my job here is done. Ah... I suppose you'll be wanting to press charges against Jabez?"

"To the full extent, Lieutenant," Nicholas said grimly. "I want that lunatic locked away for the rest of his life."

"Well, we've certainly got enough evidence in this case," Columbo assured him, stumbling when another explosion rocked the flaming greenhouse.

"He has harassed us, destroyed property, attacked us physically with the intent to murder," Nicholas said as Varina buried her face against his neck. "He must be put away for good."

Columbo nodded, shoved his hands in his raincoat pockets. "His diary tells of other so-called 'vampires' he has hunted down and murdered. I'd say we have an air-tight case."

"Liam, is the house safe?" Nicholas asked, and when the butler nodded, he turned and began walking towards the house, Columbo on his heels.

"Then based on his diary, our appearance in court would not be necessary," Nicholas suggested, carrying Varina up to their private suite of rooms. Columbo hesitated to follow, but Nicholas glanced at him over his shoulder and motioned for the lieutenant to join them.

"Well, I'm not the prosecutor or the DA, but I'd say your statements would certainly help seal the case against him," Columbo said as Nicholas settled Varina on her side of the bed.

"Could we make statements... What do they call them, depositions? ...and have our statements stand for us? I would prefer to avoid the media circus that I suspect this case will attract. It's the stuff a scandalmonger's dreams are made of, isn't it?" Nicholas said, sitting on his side of the bed and wrapping his

hands around his wife's while looking at Columbo.

The policeman rubbed his nose, lifted an eyebrow, and nodded. "Yes sir, I suppose it is. I'll see what I can do about that, but I can't guarantee anything."

"Oh, Lieutenant, I think you underestimate your powers of persuasion," Varina said, smiling at him. "But please don't concern yourself--I know Nicholas is trying to spare my feelings, but I'm willing to testify in person. I'll do anything necessary to put that man away for good."

"Varina," Nicholas began disapprovingly.

"I'll try, Mrs. Tannek," Columbo promised.

"That's all we can ask," she said, glancing at her husband. "Beloved, you know that we must do whatever is necessary to protect not only ourselves but anyone else he might decide must be destroyed. He is a menace to mankind."

"But the notoriety--"

"It's a risk we must take," she interrupted gently. "If it means changing our names and relocating afterwards, then that is what we will do."

"Well, ma'am, I'll talk to the DA, see if he'll accept your written testimony," Columbo said, a frown wrinkling his brow. "The diary is pretty strong evidence, and the autopsy and forensics will support his confession. Don't you worry, Mrs. Tannek."

She nodded, looking suddenly pale and drained. "I believe I need rest," she said, her voice a mere whisper.

"I'll see the lieutenant to the door," Nicholas told her, kissing her hand before standing up and motioning for the police lieutenant to follow him.

"I hope Mrs. Tannek is going to be okay," Columbo said in a low voice. "Maybe you should take her to the hospital, just to be sure. She could be going into shock--"

"She just needs some rest, Lieutenant," Nicholas assured him. "I am a doctor and I believe I can take care of her. I do want to thank you for your assistance in rescuing her from that madman."

"I'm just glad we were able to get her out of there. Must have been pretty cheap padlocks, huh?" Columbo said, following Tannek down the stairs.

"Quite cheap," Nicholas said with a slight smile.

"Yeah." Columbo fell silent until they reached the foyer. Then he turned to Nicholas and offered his hand. "Well, good night, Dr. Tannek. You take good care of your wife now."

"I always have," the taller man assured him enigmatically.

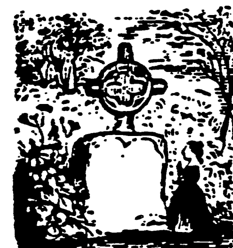
Columbo nodded, glanced around one last time and went out to his car. It stood alone on the gravel driveway, the fire trucks and police cars having already departed.

"Vampires," the lieutenant muttered as he settled behind the wheel of the old sportscar. "Silly." He must have been imagining things--*everyone* had a shadow, right?

He looked up at the third floor where the lights were being extinguished. It was just a crazy man's obsession: there were no such things as vampires. "Next thing you know I'll be believing in ghosts and leprechauns," Columbo muttered, shoving the car into gear and pulling away with a spray of gravel. He was suddenly anxious to get home to his own wife and the reassurance of their regular routine.

- End -





MOONSHINE

by

Rachel Kadushin

The moon was her sun. It was not as bright as the sun, but sometimes it was too bright to look into. Most of the time Elena could see and watch the face of the moon like some visible Deity-Who-Does-Not-Answer. What of science, and what of magic? Which was true? Both? Had blood-sucking, fanged people and creatures existed before the creation of the Devil or the birth of Jesus? Anything more esoteric than engineering contracts had not entered her mind until seven months ago. She had nearly adjusted now, but when she reflected on all the things that could have gone wrong that first night...

One evening Elena Grissom awakened to the moonlight shining on her. She adjusted her vision while her ears picked up the sobs of young children. Then she counted. Including the darkened corners of the large warehouse room, there were eight. She felt strange and rubbed her right wrist, which seemed to be recovering from a puncture wound. Was she there for a purpose? The last thing she remembered was a cocktail party with Tac Jackson. He could have drugged her...

Two of the children, a boy and a girl, were trying to reach the lone window by standing on each other's shoulders. Oddly for children of that age, the boy below her seemed more interested in getting out than remarking about looking up the girl's dress. Elena saw that not one wore clean clothes; the main smell of the room was damp, salt, and mustiness. Another boy walked up to the duo. They both stood on their toes. The girl reached upward, still over two meters from the high window.

"We're all going to die here. That will do no good!" he caustically remarked. The girl looked down to him wordlessly, and then turned her head back up toward the window that brought the light.

The children had been ignoring Elena for the most part, and again she noticed how strange it was that she could see into every corner of the room.

One of the sobbing children, an Oriental girl, looked up at Elena and spoke. "Mister says there is no escape. I bet you're not a mommy or we would want to kill you."

Elena pulled herself into a crouch, and steadied herself with one hand pushed against the ground. She got to her feet. She was not as light-headed as she expected. She walked a few steps toward the grimy-faced girl. "What do you mean?" Elena asked her. "I'm sure you wouldn't want to kill your mommy or daddy." Great. That did not come out well at all. She had to be direct and honest in talking to these children if she were to find out anything useful.

A blonde-haired girl who had been pacing walked up to Elena with all the fury of a temper tantrum, dark tears at her eyes. "Don't tell Chin-li-han that she's wrong!" She then punched Elena in the stomach. Elena flinched, but did not move. If they were all locked in this room, and all... She reached to feel the outline of her own ears. As she had focused on each child, she had noticed that their ears were pointed. Hers were, too! Her gut turned in sadness at the loss, and then screamed with survival instincts.

Newton and Pythagoras! Oh, god... They had been transformed somehow. *Not possible! I'm an engineer. You can't change the DNA of living people.* Elena

reached out to the face of the blonde girl who seemed surprised that punching Elena had had no effect. Her tears were dark. She brought her finger to her mouth. The tears were blood!

While Elena reflected, the girl who had punched her sat down and began talking to her fist. Whoever "Mister" was he, and who knows who else, had terrorized the children. However, focusing on helping them did not alleviate the sinking feeling she had. Gingerly she reached into her mouth. Sharp canine teeth. The last boy, a short chubby six-year-old with light brown hair; the blonde girl who had hit her; and a red haired girl who until then had been rolling around on the ground with her arms around herself, all mimicked the motion of touching those sharp teeth in their own mouths.

Her teeth did not seem all that different, but she couldn't really tell without a mirror. That is, if she would have a reflection! Would her canine teeth grow larger and pointier when a blood hunger overcame her? Maybe she was at a half-way stage, and could get out... Instinct told her no. Damn, she could not help them if she allowed herself to become light-headed. It was Elena's turn to sit down. She had to capture panic and put it aside.

"We don't need help," the last girl had said. She looked so much like the original drawings of the child with the coal-black hair in "The Little Princess." Perhaps she knew the likeness, and was acting like her mentor. In all, the children did not look sinister, just tired.

"Gather 'round, people." Three looked her way. *Pretend you are a teacher with a very small class. You can do it! But don't insult their intelligence!*

"Yes, you!" She made sweeping arm gestures. "We need to help each other if...if we are going to get along--be free--go home." Reason demanded that she could not actually be dead. She was warm, and still breathing. *What really happened? But how can you remember what happened when you were unconscious? Can't, so leave it!*

In a few moments they were all sitting around her. As Elena sat down, the two at the window, reluctantly, became the last ones to join the small circle.

"Okay, I'm sure that we all want to get out of here--" She was cut off by the small boy who had first taken an interest in her.

"We're already dead. What's the point?" he asked in a whisper.

The taller boy with the dark brown hair, who had tried to stop the boy and girl on each other's shoulders, nodded his head in agreement. He was older than ten. "Mister was quite clear that it was our place to die."

The red and blonde haired girls looked to the older boy and said in unison, "Don't say Mister--nothing about him."

A low chant of "Mister, Mister, Mister...," repeated over and over again, rose in the children's voices. They joined hands and circled around Elena in a frighteningly feral parody of children's games.

"Stop!" Elena yelled. They did, and a few looked up at her with pleading eyes. She continued, off the top of her head, at a rapid pace. "You must all tell me your names. I'm Elena. If you don't like your given name, make one up. I won't know the difference! Just make sure you remember it, and you can be fresh--anyone you want!"

Elena tried to remember the events leading up to her eerie prison. Tac Jackson! Damn that sycophant. He had to have put a mickey in her drink. She should never have accepted it!

Children were the reason Elena had met Tac Jackson. Some months ago she had been a witness to a drunk driver who had hit a child waiting on a corner. She had performed C.P.R. on the child until an ambulance came. Since then, she had become friends with the family. Tac Jackson had been the reporter following the case. He had thought her involvement with Ceila Farness' family made a good follow-up story, and after he had interviewed Elena a second time, he had begun to hit on her. He had good information, too. So she had let him make his play without conceding to what she thought he really wanted. Elena was the civil engineer for an architecture firm that was seeking city contracts. Tac had invited her to a party where she could network with some of the men and women of the city, and in

her greed she had accepted.

Two of the smaller children introduced themselves first. The chubby six-year-old boy introduced himself with a gleam in his eye as "Sandman". The red haired girl was Merridith. Alice was the girl who had hit her, and Elizabeth was the one on the shoulders of "Firechief". Theo was the doubting Thomas. "Tiger" was the Victorian heroine, while Chin-li-han was the fifth girl.

"Are we..." formed on Elena's lips. Now that the children had introduced themselves, certainly some with new names, they seemed more comfortable, and less like the abused, kidnapped children they were. "Okay," she started again. The children seemed obsessed with death. *You can't ask children if this place is hell.* "Let's figure out what is real, the real truth, and what is fantasy." She licked her lips and realized that she needed something. Not food--energy! Elena looked at the marks on her wrist again. She couldn't remember getting them. Damn.

"Who has pointed ears?" she asked. In moments all hands were raised. She raised her hand last to show her common lot, and to maintain the focus of the children. "What do we know in fantasy that has pointed ears?"

"Elves, and little people," Sandman supplied.

"Yeah, but only monsters have pointed teeth!" Theo rebutted.

"All of these things are not real as far as we know," Elena said. "They're just stories."

"Wait!" said Elizabeth. "Aliens could have pointed ears and teeth! But they only go to Japan."

"Could we have turned into aliens?" Firechief asked with a glimmer of hope.

"No! *NO!* Alice screamed hoarsely. We were only turned into dead, and when the sun rises we're finished!"

"That's called being a vampire," Elena said quietly. She said it aloud more for herself than for the children, but they all heard her, and their attention was riveted.

Sandman spoke. "Me, Alice, and Tiger were here the longest. Mister gave us...us..."

"Blood to drink," Tiger supplied in a deadpan voice.

Sandman nodded his head, and continued. "Yes, and injections--shots. They did not hurt as much as Doctor's shots, but it means we are doomed!"

Some of their statements were starting to add up in her mind. "No," Elena answered. "No matter what he did, he can't make you un-love your families. Your parents and guardians might not understand you now, but humankind has a history of kids being misunderstood by their families."

"I am one of you, and I can't believe it yet. But no matter what, you--each of you--" She pointed around to each child. "Each of you is responsible for your own love and anger. No one can make you go wild and kill the ones you love, no matter what happens." This was too much. Now she was crying those tears of blood, too. "You've got to believe it!"

"He locked us up like dolls before," Tiger said.

"In doll trunks," Merridith supplied.

"That was supposed to keep us safe!" Alice said loudly, confused. She seemed to want to believe Elena, but the shadow of "Mister" was still strong over them. Elena wanted to plan now.

I must get them to safety, but they need more.

Elena sat down and grabbed Alice's and Chin-li's hands. The others sat down, too. Everyone held on to or touched someone else. Some held very lightly; others squeezed fiercely. Together they came up with the reality of *now.* Silently they held and hugged each other, proving what was real for the moment. They all knew that they were in danger, but sitting together proved that they all were in on solving their situation.

Then for a few minutes, they discussed what else they thought vampires could do and needed. They were all stronger than they had been before. Sandman told about how he had insisted that they practice "super hypnosis" in secret so that they could escape. However, their male adult captor had perfected his strength of

will, and they had no effect on him. As he had taken each child for private sessions, there had been no resistance, though Sandman and Merridith had found that they could hypnotize the other children if given group consent to practice. Even though the children had seemed not to be paying much attention to each other when Elena had come to consciousness, they had already begun to forge rules of society. Unfortunately, due to the circumstances, most of the rules had fed their mutual despair.

As Elena got the children to agree to cooperate in making a "human" chain to escape through the high window, she lamented her loss of being a morning person. Was there a court in the afterlife where you could contest your sentence? *Afterlife? I still feel alive, just different.*

Elena was not about to make it harder by telling the children that under normal conditions their physical escape looked impossible. Kids took many physical risks. This one was to save their lives. Jumping knocked the breath out of her but, like the children, she landed on her feet, unharmed.

The hardest thing to believe was that her feelings of warmth and breathing were illusions. She noticed that some of the children appeared to be breathing, while others did without it. The brain was still there, even if it now lived on very complex liquid nutrient. How conscious was her former autonomic system? She concentrated and stopped her body from breathing. It felt unreal at first. She did not feel a lack of air, but the dull hunger in the back of her mind became more biting.

She ticked off her thoughts since she woke up like a shopping list. This had annoyed her last boyfriend, but it had been the only way to get through her advanced engineering classes. Formulas could be quite elegant.

Part of her mind fiddled with ultraviolet light calculations, and another part pondered if the children could grow. Unless they really could spontaneously turn into elves, and over time age into some kind of adult that would breathe and not need blood, would they be frozen in their present form? Would any mammal blood suffice, or would it have to be human? What about freshness or warmth? Getting blood from a blood bank would not be easy.

First they had to get somewhere safe before the sun rose and they were trapped where they were, dead or at "Mister's" mercy. They had been told that the sunlight would kill them, and perhaps it would. Until Elena found a vampire she trusted--that was an idea to get use to--until then, that was one vampire-undead myth she would not test. "Uh, guys, I know we don't have to breathe, but until magic is proven true to me, I'll go with science," Elena declared.

"What do you mean?" asked Theo. He had finally begun to cheer up as they had all been able to jump out the window with no harm, and the ones remaining were able to pull each other up to the window.

"In science, if you don't use something, you lose it," Elena said. Her audience was growing again as each child gathered round. "Well, when we were--regular--we used our lungs to breathe and get oxygen." Some nods. "Well, if we go by mythology--stories--and all we can eat or drink is blood--"

Sandman cut her off. "Eureka! Blood carries oxygen and nutrients!"

"Right," Elena said. If we keep breathing, we might still be able to get oxygen through our lungs. Since our hearts are organs, and they work, even if not as well as before, and our lungs are organs--"

Theo was the oldest and not to be left out. "If we keep trying to breathe, and it works, we won't need as much blood to survive!"

There were smiles and tension-releasing laughs all around.

"Hey, that's right," said Tiger. "In the stories they always buried vampires. You can't breathe underground!"

"There's no air there! Chin-li-han agreed. they were relieved that the scarier parts of the stories did not have to be true.

Elena looked around. She was in a part of town that she did not recognize. For a few moments she still held on to the belief that they were in hell or purgatory. An inability to see the stars, the orange glow over the city, and the sight of a pay phone were the elements that convinced her otherwise. She and the

children might have been transformed, but this was real!

Elena went to the pay phone; the children acted as lookouts. No change, no money. Operator calls and toll free numbers. Why had it come to her mind? Her subconscious had been working on the problem. "Vampire" was a seven letter word. Everything else had been guesses, so she had to try! She giggled nervously and dialed 1-800-VAMPIRE.

The phone rang. Three times. An educated guess could get you a long way in this world, she thought.

A recorded voice answered. *You have reached 1-800-VAMPIRE. All operators are gone for the evening and can be reached in normal business hours between nine and five. Please listen to the automated choices if you are at a touch tone phone.*

Wait, Elena told herself. *Do not panic.* If she were reaching this line in a normal, non-magical way, obviously anyone could call it.

"Press two for temporary shelter, press three for sunlight-proofing your abode..."

Amazing! Elena stabbed her finger on three. She was still in her home town, and she had a two bedroom apartment. One bedroom was a home office, but... A non-canned voice answered.

"Good evening, Sailor Hardware is here for all your sunlight-proofing needs." A direct line to a business. Very clever, she hoped.

"Hi, hello," Elena said awkwardly. Speaking with the children had been easier than trusting a baritone voice at the end of a line. "I've got a home, an apartment, but I'm not there yet."

"Is the art work there now?" the man asked with the smooth tones of a salesman. That's what made her nervous. Just like the automated phone line had a screen of information to deter--the normal. The connection had been direct, and she was on a toll free line.

She put her hand over the receiver, and looked away from the phone to the faces of some of the children who were watching and listening to her. Merridith, her bare legs sitting on the curb, was not shivering, but leaning over her body, eyes closed tightly.

An instant had passed. "No art--no art as precious as human life," she breathed, almost choking on her words. "I don't know any codes."

The voice and manner of the man on the other end changed. He did not exactly acknowledge her possible situation, but instead of "smooth salesman" she got "talkative plumber". She gave him her address, and the number and dimensions of her windows. She was informed through the patter that it was 2:30 in the A.M. but that they thought they could complete the job in time. They could start before she got there--no problem.

She didn't ask how they would get in, and they didn't ask how she would pay for it. It was not the most comforting of thoughts that they could break into her house, but what other choice did she have!

She hung up the phone and thought about what her next step should be. All her identification and her wallet were gone, but with the children she thought she could get a cab driver to wait for her to go upstairs and get money.

Logically she should cancel her credit cards, but her gut feeling was that she would have time. Whoever had kidnapped her had taken her wallet so that her body would not be identifiable. Right? Well, she had no intention of becoming a "body"!

However, as soon as they knew she was "alive", they would also know where she lived. She had sunrise as a deadline--literally--for today. She did not keep all of her credit cards in her wallet, either. Just the one with the lowest maximum that she had gotten in college for emergencies. Her bank card...well, getting a driver to pick up a woman and eight children in the middle of nowhere was her first problem.

She thought again about the second choice on the 1-800-VAMPIRE message for temporary shelter. She would be in a stronger position at home. She would have to get there sometime, and might not be able to later if the "evil" vampire still had her wallet and knew she was "alive".

"Forget the second cab," Sandman said. He thought that he could hypnotize the driver. It would be safer that way, but the small child had not yet had the chance to try his powers on a normal human. Elena was out-voted before she had a chance to state her opinion. The children wanted to try it, and she had to allow them the self-respect for one person, one vote in an area none of them could know the outcome of.

Sandman waited at her side, while the other children hid. When a gypsy cab finally stopped, he got in the front seat, caused the driver to look at him just by being a kid, then held the man's attention. The other children scrambled into the car on Elena's signal, some hiding under the seat, and some sitting next to her.

She gave the driver verbal directions to her house while he was still under Sandman's thrall. She told him that he would forget he had ever picked them up, and drive home after he let them off. Technically it was stealing, but she could note his license plate and send him the money if she felt that ten or twenty bucks was worth the risk.

The driver's gaze was fixed on one of Sandman's raised fingers--yes, the middle one--he was a kid, after all. Sandman finally directed the driver's gaze forward, climbed into the man's lap, and then returned to his side before giving him a verbal release command to drive. Scary, but true. Elena would have to make sure that Sandman didn't try to pull any of that stuff on her!

The three workmen already had one of her front windows out when she arrived. They set the window down when she entered, each reacting differently to the presence of eight children. The first ignored them. His coverall was stitched with the name "Foley". The second was gruff and grumbly. The third, Jamie, quietly stood back and watched. Elena had the children promise in front of the workers that they would stay out of their way. Then she showed them the two bedrooms.

As they filed past the three men, Foley bent down, his hands on his knees, and took a close look at the children. Conscious of how late it was, after Elena had shown the children to her office, she went back to offer the men coffee. Foley accepted and the other two men passed, Jamie with a slight smile. Foley and the grumbly man with no name on his jacket took the window downstairs, while Jamie began to remove the second front window.

Elena went to the kitchen to do the first normal thing since she had awakened. She patted her coffee maker, and went to her refrigerator to get milk for the coffee. She noticed three large jars that she had not placed in there. At least as far as she could remember. They were filled with a dark liquid. The milk was spoiled, so she could have been unconscious for a few days. She quietly closed the refrigerator and got some dry creamer from the cupboard.

"Will you be staying over, then?" she asked Jamie after handing the hot drink over to Foley.

"Safer that way," Jamie said. He tipped his cap to her.

The controlled rascalliness in Jamie made Elena sigh in relief. There seemed to be a community. There were normal people who knew, and there was great evil and danger out there. No matter what she learned from this point, Elena knew that she would still be dealing with the human mind and spirit.

- The End -

[Rachel Kadushin has had short works printed in Clipper Trade Ship, Grip, Who Else? and Fantom Alterations. Her poetry will appear in a Labyrinth fanzine from Crystal Balls Press. She invites others to write in the 1-800-VAMPIRE universe created in "Moonshine", but to consult with her if they are interested in collaborating.]

RUNNING

by

Cheryl L. Connors

The man's body swung slowly in a draft in the middle of the deserted campaign headquarters. The same draft had earlier swept a blizzard of posters onto the floor; a thousand pictures of his own smiling face safely ensconced with his family now gazed up at his lifeless body. A door slammed. The hanging man danced on, alone.

*

In the same room, hours later, Nick Knight looked up from his notebook, suddenly aware that his partner was humming in time to the corpse's sway. Ignoring the bevy of technicians busy documenting the scene, Nick tapped an elbow into Schanke's ribs, and growled, "Knock it off!"

"Oof. Knock off what?". His partner gave Nick an aggrieved look, rubbing his side. "What, you don't like music?" The others glanced up from their various tasks, grinning.

"Go home, Schanke. You're day shift, remember? I can handle it from here. You need some sleep."

"That's what I like. A partner who can't seem to get enough of me." Schanke's laugh turned into a yawn. "Guess I'm not as young as I used to be. All these long shifts are getting to me."

Nick felt an uncomfortable twinge at the reminder that his partner was mortal, that he would grow old, that he would die. A patrolman stuck his head in, interrupting his morbid thoughts. "Hey, Detective Knight? The guy's wife's here. So's the press."

"Damn. Thanks, Mike." Nick gave Schanke a sly look. "Why don't you say hello to our fav guys and gals out there on your way home?"

"They like you better, pretty boy."

"Schanke." It was a plea. It wasn't the reporters that bothered Nick. It was their cameras he hated. Avoiding getting his picture taken had become an obsession since Alyce Hunter's death. Long years ago Nick had foolishly allowed himself to be photographed at the Alton Kinal dig. Alyce had seen that picture, and she'd paid the price for that lapse in his vigilance. Nick's expression must have betrayed something of his pain to his partner, because Schanke suddenly relented.

"All right, all right. But it'll cost you."

"Anything." Nick's voice was fervent, and Schanke grinned at his obvious relief. "Dinner at Nateo's. Tomorrow night."

"Done."

Solemnly they shook hands.

"Cripes, Nick," Schanke complained, "your hands are freezing. I told you before, you gotta eat more garlic. You know, build your blood up?"

"What are you, my mother? Go home." Nick turned quickly to give a pointed look at the patrolman still at the door before the man could wipe the smile off his face at his superiors amiable bickering. "Escort Mrs. Bannering to one of the


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side offices, Mike. I'll be right in. Don't tell her anything." At the policeman's nod, Nick swept a glance at the rest of the team. "We done here? Can we take the body down now?" At the murmur of agreement, Nick nodded to the ambulance drivers. "Don't take off yet. I want to get a firm ID on him first." Nick turned to the door, then hesitated. "Dr. Shim? Run a coke test on him, will you?"

The assistant coroner raised an eyebrow. "You found some on him?"

"No, just a hunch." Nick could hardly tell the doctor that he could smell the addiction on the man's skin like a poisonous perfume. He shifted his attention to the uniformed sergeant at his shoulder. "Dave. Have someone check the trash for any pizza boxes. If you don't find anything in here, check the dumpsters outside."

Dave shook his head slowly back and forth in disapproval. "Nick, if you're that hungry, I'll have someone get you a burger."

"Very funny." Another secret to keep. He could smell the sour reek of garlic and tomatoes in the air even if no one else could. If they could trace a recent delivery, they might have a witness. Spotting Mike, waiting patiently for him, Nick followed the patrolman into a small side office where the newly-made widow was waiting.

Mrs. Emily Bannering was a middle-aged, carefully made up woman, carefully dressed in conservative colors of blue and white. She looked like a political candidate. At the moment, a very tired one. Escorting her were two men; their three faces were registering various degrees of curiosity and annoyance.

"Mrs. Bannering, I'm Detective Knight, assigned to this investigation." Nick gave the three of them a quick look, then focused on Mrs. Bannering. He'd ordered no one reveal that it was her husband they'd found. He wanted to watch her expression when the woman heard the news. Nick refused to admit to himself that he also wanted to use his enhanced senses to give him some clue about her. Would she be surprised to hear her husband was dead? No matter how good an actress she was, he'd know. Besides, family members were always among the first suspects. Even if one of them were a candidate for political office.

"Investigation? What's going on here? What the hell are you talking about?" Their protests overlapped, and Nick waited patiently until the voices died away. He didn't know a gentle way to say it. Clearing his throat, Nick rested his eyes on the woman's face as he answered their questions. "Mrs. Bannering, I'm very sorry. It's your husband. He's dead."

The woman was strong; Nick saw her pale, her eyes fill, but then she lifted her chin, refusing to succumb to her pain. There had been a flash of some emotion in her face. Guilt? Relief? Nick wasn't sure, but he knew she hadn't been aware of her husband's death. That might mean much, or nothing at all, Nick told himself cynically. Mrs. Bannering's eyes followed the stream of uniformed and plain-clothed policeman into the main room, and she made a convulsive movement to the door, to see for herself.

Nick moved in front of her, cocking an ear towards the other room. He could hear the drivers arguing about the best way to drop the body from where it still hung. Just another job for them. Just another body. Not a beloved and suddenly lost member of their family. Mrs. Bannering raised blind eyes to his, and Nick said firmly, with kindness, "You don't want to remember him like this." He hesitated, "If you think you're up to it, would you give us a formal identification when he's in the ambulance?"

Mrs. Bannering nodded. Grateful, Nick pulled up a chair from a corner and ushered her into it. He gazed at the men accompanying her and asked, "May I have your names?"

The short chunky man spoke up first. His polyester navy jacket seemed mismatched with his off-yellow pants and shirt. Nick wasn't a fashion critic, but it looked odd. And he noted odd things. "I'm Emily's brother, Jeff Hindle." The man swallowed, wiping perspiration off his balding forehead. "Mark's brother-in-law. Poor Mark. He's been so depressed lately."

"And you are?" Nick asked the second man. This man looked to be in his

sixties, and frail. Also carefully dressed, he wore a classically cut suit of dark grey.

"Ed Malcom. Emily's campaign manager. Look, officer, aren't you going to tell us what happened? How did Mark die?"

Nick's eyes swept the three suspects. "It was murder."

*

"What's up, Doc?"

Concentrating on paperwork, Jack Bennington almost leaped from his chair as the voice seemed to materialize out of the air. "Nick! Damn it, you scared me half to death!"

With his inhuman hearing, Nick easily picked up his friend's frantic heartbeat. His smile faded. "Sorry. Didn't mean to startle you."

"Clump around a little next time, will ya'?"

"It's a habit I'll try to cultivate," Nick said seriously, then grinned. "But I doubt if I can."

Calming down, Jack shook his head before returning his friend's smile. "Just try, okay?" Changing the subject, he asked, "How have things been since I left?"

"Dull. Schanke's on my case, but that's nothing new." Nick sat down uninvited on a corner of the desk. Surprising himself, he found he'd missed Jack, even his nagging little phone calls. "How was the seminar? Learn any new techniques in LA to make my job easier?"

"It was all right." Jack took off his glasses, playing for time. He wasn't sure just exactly how to announce his tentative plans.

Nick frowned, picking up on his friend's hesitation. "What is it?"

Not wanting to dance around the subject, Jack said bluntly, "I was offered a position at the LA county's coroner's office, as head medical examiner."

"And you're thinking of taking it?" Nick's voice was incredulous. He jumped off the desk, staring down at the doctor as if he were suddenly a stranger, feeling betrayed.

Jack shifted silently in his chair. "It's a great offer."

"If it's the money..." Nick's voice trailed off. He offered Jack money before; the doctor had savagely refused it. It had become a sore point between them. Nick couldn't understand Jack's reluctance to take money when it was to help him find a cure, and the doctor couldn't stand even the hint that he could be bought.

"It'd be a chance to start over." Jack spoke into the air, not looking up from his paperwork. "You remember the Kinard case? The DA's office is still giving me a hard time because I refused to fudge the evidence to make it look like Kinard raped that girl before he killed her. It would have made a stronger case against him. When Kinard's lawyer got him off the murder charge, they blamed me. It's made me pretty damn unpopular over there."

"Who's been giving you a hard time?"

Nick's voice had gone flat; his eyes were yellow, feral. Even his tense stance reminded Jack of some inhuman predator. It scared him right down to the bone. Refusing to be intimidated, the doctor stood up and prodded a finger into Nick's chest. "Knock that off right now."

Nick closed his eyes and looked away, visibly making an effort to calm down. When he met the doctor's glance again, his face was human. "Sorry. It's a habit to protect..." his voice trailed off. He'd spoken before he'd thought. A mistake, especially with someone as perceptive as this human.

"Protect what? Your property? I don't belong to you, Nick." Jack could feel his temper rise.

"I know that." Nick's voice was almost a snarl. "If you were I wouldn't be standing here quaking in my shoes that you're going to abandon me."

"I'm not abandoning you. For God's sake, even if I did leave, it's only LA, not half-way across the world." Jack bit his cheek as the thoughtless expression rolled off his tongue. At the flash of pain across Nick's face, Jack sighed and sank back into his chair. "I'm sorry. Look, I haven't made any decisions yet.

I'm just thinking about it. I wanted to let you know." He shuffled some papers across his desk. His tone lightening, he asked, "How's your tanning coming?"

There was no answer. Nick had disappeared. He was alone.

Jack swore under his breath. He hadn't meant to hurt Nick, but he was having a hard time with everything lately. With work. With his personal life, or rather his absence of a personal life, he corrected himself. And dealing with his friend's little problem. Jack slid open the top drawer of his desk and pulled out a small brown leather pouch. Unzipping it, he let the cool marble beads of his mother's rosary slip into his palm. He had a lot of thinking to do.

*

Before daylight curtailed his shift, Nick gathered his notes and left a message for Schanke to call him at home. He'd spent most of the night interviewing the primary suspects. The widow. Some of the campaign workers. Bannering's boss at the construction site where he had installed plumbing. Even the campaign manager. Nothing.

The Bannering's children were out as suspects. All were attending colleges on the East coast. Nick had unashamedly eavesdropped when Emily had contacted all three while still in her campaign headquarters. There were no other family members still living.

On the surface, no one seemed to have a reason to kill Mark Bannering. Nick had his own suspicions about Emily's brother, Jeff. There had been that odd remark about the dead man's supposed depression, and a look of surprise, even chagrin at Nick's mention of murder. If Jeff had tried to make Bannering's death look like a suicide, he'd done a lousy job of it. They'd found a deep, bloody concavity in the back of Mark's head from a recent blow. Nick didn't need the coroner's report to tell him an unconscious man doesn't have the motor skills to commit suicide.

The most curious response Nick had seen was when he'd mentioned Mark's drug use. Emily had appeared horrified at the idea. She'd denied any knowledge of her husband's problem, but Nick knew better. The news had saddened, but not shocked her. After further questioning, it seemed as if everyone close to Emily had known about Mark's addiction. Nick had urged Schanke in his note to pursue that angle. If Bannering had been dealing, there could be any number of suspects. But Nick doubted an unknown assailant had attacked Bannering. Every instinct told him that Jeff Hindle was their murderer.

Safe in his sealed apartment, Nick stretched out before his bank of televisions, refusing to think any further about the Bannering case. Mindlessly, he ran an idle finger around the rim of the glass holding his dinner. It was a gaudy thing; the designer had run amok, surrounding the thin Venetian glass with thick swirls of gold embedded with countless bright gems. The sight of it always amused him. The fact that the curio was a priceless antique that would have any museum fighting to own it meant nothing to him.

The hunger clawed at Nick, and he gave in, taking a controlled sip from the glass. The pleasing taste spread over his tongue. Savoring the flavor, and despising himself for enjoying it, Nick finally let himself think about Jack. He'd been surprised at the depth of the pain he'd felt at the doctor's mention of leaving. He knew if Jack left, the doctor would slowly drift out of his life. And if he lost Jack, it wouldn't simply be the further postponement of obtaining his dream. It meant he'd be alone again. It had been more than a century since he'd been able to trust anyone, allow them into his life. He wasn't sure he could handle the thought of being so alone again.

A thick smog obscured the multiple images of the sunrise. Nick couldn't help but look at the grayness as an omen. Weary, he finished the glass, then crawled into bed, hoping for the oblivion of sleep.

Across town, Jack, unable to sleep, stood drenched in sunlight. Staring out of his apartment window, he wondered what he should do. His life had changed so

dramatically since Nick had approached him for help. Since college, he hadn't believed in anything, certainly not in a supreme being. After Nick had revealed himself, Jack's disbelief had melted. He felt no regret at helping a vampire, felt no betrayal of his renewed faith. Truthfully, he could only be grateful he'd met someone who was living proof the supernatural existed.

He'd grown to enjoy the sometimes tentative friendship that had developed between them. Jack had seen how difficult it was for Nick to drop his defenses, to expose himself so utterly when he was so vulnerable during the daylight hours. The trust was sometimes a weighty burden.

Letting the window blinds drop, Jack wandered back to his bed. He wanted to help Nick, but the job offer from LA seemed so tempting. Too often lately he'd felt useless in the sight of his friend's pain as each new attempt at a cure failed. Nick never blamed him for the failures; the man's patience seemed endless. No, he was the one who was feeling impatient. Go or stay. It seemed like such a simple choice.

As Jack climbed into bed, he lightly touched the rosary draped over one post of the headboard. The supernatural. So odd to think it was a part of his life now. The thought rolled around as he slid under the sheets. Hmm. Jack frowned. He'd been concentrating on counteracting the physical results of Nick's curse. Maybe he should be researching more into the cause...on that thought, unaware that he'd already made his choice, Jack slept.

*

Nick hated day court. It meant a careful choreographing of movement between the great sheets of light pouring in from the windows, blinding him, making him sweat with fear that a single mis-step would obliterate him. It meant most of the day spent penned up in the trunk of his car. But at least in the courtroom itself he was safe. There were no windows for security reasons, no direct sunlight at all.

Nick vastly preferred night court, and wasn't adverse to using flattery, cajolery and even a small amount of judicious bribery in the form of flowers and theater tickets to the predominately female court clerks to ensure that most of his cases went to the night shift. But every once and a while he had no choice. Like today.

Walking up the last flight of stairs from the underground garage to the main plaza of the courthouse, he found an elevator door open. As he stepped in, Nick heard his name called. Holding the door, he waited until Schanke ran up, panting.

"Glad I caught you."

Nick nodded. The doors slid shut and they started rising. They'd agreed to meet after Nick's court appearance about another case was over. If everything went well, they'd have the Bannering case sewn up before noon. Gesturing at the thick sheaf of file folders and papers his partner held, Nick asked, "You got everything?"

"You bet." Schanke was looking pleased. "Dave's got the delivery person here. She can place Hindle on the scene."

"Great." Nick shook his head, confused. "I still don't have a clue about why. Why did he kill his brother-in-law. You got any idea?"

"Nope." Schanke's lips thinned. "But we'll get it out of him."

The two policeman exchanged a satisfied look. There was no need to plan strategy, they already knew what parts to play in the upcoming interview. It shocked Nick to think that they'd meshed so quickly. It worried him. It wasn't good for him to get close to Schanke. It was dangerous. For both of them. He shook off the thought; there was no time to worry about it now.

It was a slow ride upstairs. The elevator sang softly to them..."Where little cable cars climb halfway to the stars...". Putting his hands over his ears, Nick grated to Schanke, "Man, I am beginning to *hate* this song."

Schanke nodded solemnly. "Heaven help Perry Como if I ever get my hands on him."

"Ditto."

Finally they arrived, and the doors slid open. Nick saw a familiar face in uniform, and headed over to where the sergeant was guarding a door. Dave nodded to them and reported, "Mrs. Bannering, her brother, and some lawyer are waiting for you. The delivery girl's in the john." He held out a sheet of paper. "Here's her statement."

Nick snatched it before Schanke could. He skimmed the contents, a frown knotting his brows. There was something... Impatient, his partner twitched the paper out of Nick's lax grip. Schanke dumped his paperwork on Dave's arms and concentrated on the statement. "No surprises here. At least we can place Jeff on the scene, at about the right time. Let's go."

"Wait a sec. Let me look at that again." Nick read the report more carefully this time, ignoring Schanke's impatient grumblings.

"We got him."

Nick's satisfied tone made Schanke blink. Skeptical, he asked, "How? I didn't see anything major in there."

"That's right. You didn't, cause you didn't meet Hindle that night."

"So?"

"So, he was wearing a navy jacket when I interviewed him. The witness claims he was all in yellow when she delivered the pizza. And I saw him just a few hours later."

Schanke looked blank for a minute, then enlightenment hit him. "So you think he switched jackets 'cause he got blood on the first one?"

"Right." Nick looked at the sergeant. "Dave. Call downtown. Have them do another search on the trash container where they found the pizza. Tell them they're looking..."

"For a yellow jacket," Dave finished. He pulled out his radio from his belt. "I'm on it."

Hindle denied everything when they confronted him. Emily was silent, her face grey. The lawyer tried to run interference. But when Schanke brought up the jacket, the room exploded. Jeff Hindle, feeling trapped, made a break for the door. Schanke and Nick were momentarily trapped when Mrs. Bannering and the lawyer surged to their feet, blocking the policemen's path to the exit.

Nick, careful not to run too fast, darted out first in close pursuit of the suspect. Almost close enough to tackle Hindle, two oblivious civilians stumbled right into Nick's path. Nick went down in a tangle of arms and legs, seeing his partner run past him.

Scrambling to his feet, Nick rejoined the chase, narrowly avoiding the blocks of light streaming in from the windows. Before he could catch up, Hindle, panicked, went out a fire exit door. Nick froze. He was helpless to follow. Sick with the thought of leaving Schanke alone, Nick heard footsteps approach and quickly whipped out his handkerchief to press it to his forehead.

"Detective Night? What happened?"

It was Dave. Grateful, Nick ordered the sergeant, "Quick. Put a call for anyone in the area to get in pursuit of Hindle. The idiot made a run for it. Schanke's chasing him down the fire escape now."

Nick listened to Dave make the appeal for help, guilt making him feel as if he *were* ill. He was useless. All he could do was hope some policeman already in the building would be able to help Schanke corner Hindle. Despising himself for doing it, yet knowing it was necessary, Nick let his back rest on the wall, sliding down until he was sitting on the floor, as if he were too dizzy to stand.

Finishing the call, Dave sent a concerned look at his superior. "Hey, you okay?"

"Took a fall. Cracked my head. I'll be fine." Nick gestured down the hall. "Go after Schanke."

The sergeant hesitated, then left him. Alone, Nick climbed slowly to his feet, ignoring the bystanders. He had to get to his car. To hide.

*

Nick found himself at Jack's office that night. He needed to talk. And there was only one person he could talk to, even if the man planned on leaving soon.

"I couldn't help Schanke go after Hindle." Nick shook his head. "Sometimes I'm not sure I'm doing the right thing. I shouldn't have let the captain give me a partner. I couldn't be there to cover Schanke's back. What I did do was spend the rest of the day in the trunk of the caddy. I had to lie, tell the captain I went to the doctor." He touched the wide bandage on his head in disgust at his subterfuge.

"But Schanke did catch him," Jack pointed out. He shuddered to himself at the enormous risks Nick took just to go to the courthouse. Never mind trying to chase Hindle down a sunlight corridor. Madness.

"Do you know, we still don't have a motive?" Nick gave Jack a bemused look. "Schanke and I think he did it for his sister. To stop Bannering before he caused a scandal with his drug use." Nick shrugged. "Now that her brother's an accused murderer, Mrs. Bannering's dropped out of the race. Some help he was. Like me. A big help."

That his friend was blaming himself for not following his partner into the sun was too much. "Nick, don't be ridiculous. You're ignoring the fact that you're the one that exposed Hindle."

Nick shrugged. "I guess."

The cop's voice was listless, and Jack winced. Deliberately changing the topic, he ordered. "Roll up your sleeve."

Nick went very still. "Why?"

"I have some ideas I'd like to explore. But I need some of that stuff in your veins that pretends to be blood first."

Jack saw the repressed hope in Nick's eyes. "Does this mean...."

"The job in LA? Changed my mind." Jack waved a hand, dismissing the subject. "Listen, I think I've been approaching this all wrong. I've been trying to treat your problem as if it were a biological disorder. By ignoring the supernatural element I think I'm..."

Relief welled in Nick, and he interrupted Jack's speech to say simply, "Thanks."

The doctor slipped his hands in his tunic pockets. "Nick. I'm sorry. I just felt..."

Nick cut him off, his voice soft. "I understand."

Somehow, Jack knew he did. Gruff, the doctor said, "I won't desert you. I promise." He lifted the syringe. "Now roll up your sleeve. I haven't got all day."

"Try not to be so rough this time." Nick let a note of complaint creep into his voice. "Last time you gave me a bruise the size of an orange. Took a week to disappear."

Jack gave him a severe look. "Get serious."

Back to normal. Nick, his heart light, allowed Jack to bully him. He wouldn't be alone. Not for a long time. And maybe his friend would find a cure. Maybe.

- The End -

[Cheryl has also written about Nick Knight in "Dry Ice," upcoming in <u>Sherwood Tunnels 7</u>, available from Dianne Smith, 201 Sims Ave., Victoria, B.C., V8Z 1K4, Canada.]

PARTNERS

by

M.H. Burchett

Captain Brunetti was more irritable than he had been in a long time. The flu epidemic that had plagued L.A. for the last two weeks had finally swept through his police station, leaving him with a serious shortage of manpower. As if this weren't enough, LA was struck at the same time with a devastating heat wave.

Rather than stifle the activity of the city's lowlife, the oppressive heat did just the opposite. It seemed to have activated even the most lethargic of their number. Within that same given two week period, criminal reports of the usual assortment of muggings, stabbings, shootings, and drug related crimes had doubled. The reports on the two "would-be specialists" in arson and prostitutes' murders, also terrorizing the city, were added to these, and together they almost buried the normally overloaded desk of the exhausted captain. Criminal activity was definitely at a record-breaking, all-time high.

To top this all off, the Mayor's special committee on equal opportunity had chosen this particular time to discover that the detective divisions of certain police stations were very delinquent in meeting the correct ratio of women to men in their ranks. Their claim that women were not being given a fair shake reached the Mayor's ear. With election time fast approaching, the Mayor had a talk with the Police Commissioner.

The Commissioner tried to explain that there just weren't any policewomen qualified to be detectives at the moment, but the Mayor wouldn't accept that. With his persuasion, transfers for the next best qualified women were pushed through, and Brunetti was the first to be notified of his latest and youngest detective.

For Brunetti, it was the last straw.

"Politics!" He shouted to anyone within earshot, "It's all politics! It's not bad enough that I've got the worst criminal area in the city and I already have to coddle more than my fair share of prima donnas..."

"Don't look at me," Detective Nick Knight said, as he walked past him with a book of mug shots. "I agreed to take on Schanke as a partner. What more do you want?"

Brunetti frowned at him and continued."...but now, I've got to be a baby-sitting service so that we can look good for the Mayor's committee! Who cares if we have a job to do around here!"

Nick drew a chair up next to his new partner and the elderly witness to the previous night's shooting they were investigating.

An unidentified body of a young man had been found in the neighborhood of two of the most violent gangs in L.A. Normally, that would have been enough to prompt Captain Brunetti to send his men scouring the area for gang members. But the Muerte Negro gang had recently astonished him and the other authorities of law and order in the City of Angels by doing the unheard of. Not only did they strive for--but they achieved--peace with their archenemies, the Perreros Locos.

Brunetti wanted to maintain the tenuous harmony between these two previously warring gangs for as long as possible. He had decided to keep the investigation under wraps...at least until it could be determined whether it was gang related or

not. Thankfully, there was a witness.

An old shopkeeper had seen the crime committed in the lonely alleyway behind his store. He had called it in and since no one else had happened by before the police came and removed the body, only he...and the killer...knew of the neighborhood murder. With luck, the crime would be solved quickly and quietly. The witness would identify the murderer...and it wouldn't be anyone from either gang.

Nick placed the mug book on the table before the shopkeeper and opened it to the first page of pictures. "Just take your time," he told him, "and see if any of these look like the man you saw."

Schanke smiled at his partner. "Is he still ranting about the new recruit?" he asked, motioning to Brunetti with a nod of his head.

Nick smiled back and nodded. "What's her name, by the way?" he asked.

"Collene Ryan," Schanke said. "She starts tomorrow night."

"Tomorrow night?" Nick was slightly surprised. "She's got the night shift? That's a bit tough on a new recruit. It should be interesting."

"Yeah." Schanke commented sarcastically. "Just be glad you've got me as your partner."

"What are you talking about?"

"Well," Schanke began, glancing at Brunetti, before pulling his chair closer to Nick and continuing in a conspiratorial tone, "word has it, Brunetti set her up with Sullivan, but Sullivan's wife flipped. She didn't want him to have a female partner. So he begged Brunetti to give her to someone else. Only thing is, there *is* no one else." He snickered, "If we hadn't hooked up as partners, she'd be yours."

Nick eyed Schanke. "How much worse could it be?"

Schanke wagged a finger in his face. "I know you don't mean that," he said. "Just because you're used to being a loner doesn't erase the fact that we work good together."

"Yeah," Nick conceded, trying unsuccessfully to hide a smile, "I guess we do."

"Besides, the young ones are the worst. You know what I mean?"

Nick gave him a blank look.

"No, you don't know what I mean." Schanke sighed and shook his head. "I had to break in a new kid once. Don't get me wrong. He was a nice kid, a real nice kid. Everyone liked him, but he was so green, he almost killed me the first time we went out."

"You're kidding."

"No, I'm not. He got so nervous, he shot at a fleeing perp I had just started to chase."

"You're talking about a rookie, one straight out of the academy?"

"Yeah..."

"Well, Collene's supposedly been a cop for almost three years, right?"

"Yeah, but she's spent all of it in the records department and she's never been out on the streets! She might as well be totally green."

"Give her a break. She's also supposed to be smart. Who knows, she might be a great detective."

"Yeah," Schanke snickered, "and Brunetti intends to recommend us all for raises."

Nick looked over at the elderly witness. "This'll probably take him awhile." He stood up. "I'm going to see if Jack's found out anything more on the victim. I'll be right back."

*

Driving over to the lab, Nick wondered if Schanke ever questioned his relationship with Jack. Had Schanke ever noticed, for instance, that Nick "checked in" with Jack every shift before they went out on their cases? Would the facts that he and Jack were friends and that Jack held the position of being one of the main sources of information on their murder victims be enough to explain

why he touched base with him every night?

Hopefully, they would be.

"You worry too much," Nick told himself. "Schanke's probably never given it a second thought. Fact is, he probably doesn't think at all." He smiled to himself, but knew it wasn't true. He would have to watch himself around the human detective. What if Schanke decided to find out what he and Jack were up to and started to snoop?

Nick sighed. He and Schanke had been partners for the last three weeks. With such an amusing...and irritating...companion, Nick couldn't indulge in his usual state of lonely introspection. Forced nightly to interact with the loud, opinionated Schanke, he was surprised to find himself feeling more a part of the world of living, breathing humans.

This happy turn of events, however, did have its price. It put Nick at risk. It could be dangerous...very dangerous...for him. Nick knew the odds of Schanke discovering his secret grew greater with each passing night...and he definitely did *not* want Schanke to discover his secret. The fewer people who knew, the better--and the greater his chances of survival. Granted, it was still the attitude of a vampire, but it had helped him to exist for four centuries and he would keep that attitude until the day, hopefully, he changed.

Nick laughed to himself. It was funny, when he thought of it. Though Schanke seemed very sharp in many areas, as yet he was blind to many things that Nick thought were very obvious about himself. The most glaring, of course, was that he never ate or drank in Schanke's presence. For someone who seemed to be constantly eating, amazingly, so far Schanke had not noticed.

Thinking of eating, Nick wondered what curious cuisine Jack would have ready for him tonight. In the last week, he had actually been able to swallow small amounts of food...and keep them down. If he could only master his immediate revulsion and not react as if he were ingesting poison, perhaps even Schanke could be convinced that eating was a natural act for him.

Nick shook his head. Jack was convinced that eating food would be part of the solution to his "addiction". Nick wasn't so sure. He only knew that he would try just about anything to be "cured". He smiled to himself. The old proverb really was true. No matter what a doctor prescribed, it always tasted terrible.

*

The lab door was open when Nick approached it. Stepping through the doorway, he glanced around. Besides the three bodies on the examination tables, two of them in body bags, he and Jack were alone.

The doctor was behind his desk, his nose buried in paperwork. He looked up when Nick walked in.

Ignoring the wrappings on Jack's desk, which told Nick that his friend had picked dinner up from the fast food joint across the street, the detective asked, "Find out anything else on the shooting victim?"

"In a minute." Jack motioned for him to take the seat beside his desk, starting once again their nightly ritual. "How goes the partnership?" he asked lightly, as he cleared a place on his desk to lay out the food he'd bought.

Nick took a deep breath and let it out. Sitting down, he said, "Okay, I guess." He laughed. "I hate to admit it, but I'm actually getting used to Schanke's cologne."

"How long have you been on duty?"

"Tonight? About half an hour. I checked in, got Schanke a mug book, and then came down here. Why?"

"Hmm," Jack said, as he broke off a piece of his cheeseburger and placed it on a napkin, "I think I should warn you to watch your step around Schanke tonight." He took a few fries from the container and put them next to the piece of cheeseburger on the napkin. "It seems he's got a cousin visiting and he's been trying to set her up with everyone he's talked to so far." He pushed the napkin in front of Nick. "If she's a relative of Schanke's, you can imagine what she must be like." Jack picked up his 'burger and took a bite. "Umm," he said.

Nick looked at him, a smile teasing the corners of his mouth. Then he looked at the food in front of him. He poked at it suspiciously with a finger. "Cheeseburger?"

Jack nodded yes.

"...and french fries?"

Again, Jack nodded.

Nick's eyes narrowed. "Isn't this 'junk food'?"

Jack looked surprised and then his eyes narrowed. "Nick..."

Nick laughed mischievously. "I know," he said, "...just eat it." He looked down at the food again. Gingerly, he picked up some french fries. "What're these made of?" he asked.

"They're made from potatoes," the doctor replied patiently.

"...potatoes." Nick put them in his mouth. As he did so, his eye caught his friend's, intently watching him. Under Nick's gaze, Jack cleared his throat and turned away, towards his paperwork.

Nick looked at Jack's back. The thought of stashing the food into his coat pocket came to mind, but hiding it from his friend would serve no purpose. He wasn't doing this for Jack.

"Chew," he told himself. As small as the french fries were, they felt huge in his mouth. The eerie sensation of them breaking up as he chewed, the taste of them (as appetizing as chewing on clumps of clay)...and their smell! He had an almost overpowering urge to spit them out, but he resisted that impulse, trying to act as naturally as possible. He continued to chew seconds longer than necessary, not to adjust to chewing, but to postpone the next step, until it was obvious, even to himself, that he was taking too long. "Swallow," he thought.

Jack turned back towards Nick and had to hide a smile. Nick's face was in a grimace, eyes shut tightly, reminding him of the time he had had to take cod liver oil as a kid. The grimace faded from Nick's face and he slowly opened his eyes, but he seemed to be holding his breath, not moving, as if waiting to see what reaction he would have. He released a breath, then took another one. Jack was about to ask him if he wanted a drink, when Nick stopped him with a raised hand. Nick then got up and went into the small washroom near the exam area. Jack could hear him rinsing out his mouth. He shook his head. This was going to take time.

Nick came out of the washroom, wiping his mouth with a paper towel. Jack picked up his clip board and walked over to his friend. The detective was standing near the body the doctor had just examined but had not yet bagged for the city morgue. It was the victim of the shooting Nick and Schanke were investigating.

"There's not much to go on," Jack said. "He's clean. No tracks on his body, no tattoos, no ID. I'd tag him just another 'John Doe', except for the obvious..."

"He was killed in Muerte Negro/Perreros Locos territory."

"Right. And he definitely fits the general description of their gang members. Even though he wasn't wearing colors, I'll bet he had something to do with the gangs."

"I hope you're wrong. We don't need another gang war, especially now."

Jack looked at the thoughtful expression on his friend's face. "You feel for Vinnie, don't you?" he said, remembering how Nick and the leader of the Muerte Negro had seemed to instantly hit it off. "You did a good job helping him and the other gang leader come to terms. It was a hard-won truce. That's probably why Brunetti's got you handling this."

Nick shook his head. "No," he said. "Vinnie Mancuso was the one who really wanted peace. He's the one who made it happen. He finally got Luis Santiago, head of the Perreros Locos, to see the light." Nick laughed. "The name of Luis's gang really does fit him. He really is a mad dog."

The detective sobered. "It's smart of Brunetti to keep this quiet, at least 'til we know what's going on."

"Speaking of which," Jack asked, "what about the witness?"

"Well, he just came in. That's who I got the mug book for. I feel sorry for the old guy. I can tell he's really scared. He still has to live there. Here's

hoping when we catch the perp, he'll confess, 'cos I know the old man doesn't want to testify."

Nick looked at the shooting victim. He frowned. "It's funny, now that I've got a good look at this guy. I know I've never seen him before, but there's something very familiar about him." He shook his head. "Too bad. He wasn't a bad looking kid. If he could have grown up somewhere else, he might've had a chance." He glanced at the two body bags. "Where are they from?"

"Those are the victims from the 5th Street fire." Jack said. "You don't want to see them. They're pretty bad."

"Yeah," Nick said quietly, remembering Lacroix's fiery death, "it's a horrible way to go." The phone on Jack's desk rang, jarring Nick out of his reverie. Jack walked back over and answered it.

"It's Schanke," he said, holding the receiver out to Nick, "for you."

Nick took the receiver and spoke for a few minutes with his partner. "You're kidding!" The doctor heard the detective exclaim. He spoke for a few more minutes and then hung up the phone. From the brooding look on his face, Jack could see that something was bothering his friend.

"What is it, Nick?"

"I guess you're right," the detective replied. "Schanke said the witness ID'ed our perp. It's Franco Garcia, Vinnie Mancuso's right-hand man."

Jack shook his head. "Looks like the peace between the Muerte Negro and the Perreros Locos is having a major setback."

"Yeah," Nick said, almost absent-mindedly, his countenance still pensive.

Jack frowned. "Is there something else?"

Nick looked at his friend. "Yeah," he laughed, slightly uneasily. "Sullivan's come down with the bug, too. He's lined up to be the new recruit's partner, so Brunetti told Schanke she can tag along with us 'just as an observer' until Sullivan's better. It should only be a couple of days, but..."

Jack knew that look. "You've got doubts as to whether you can handle it?"

"It's not that exactly..." Nick shook his head and laughed again. "I don't know. It's been hard enough, trying to get used to working with Schanke. Now this..."

Jack smiled. He knew what his companion was really thinking. It was hard enough for Nick to function as a detective with one human in tow. How would he do it with two?

Though Nick's looks were very deceiving, the doctor never forgot that his friend saw the world through alien eyes. Being what he was and trying so hard to change must cause unimaginable conflicts in such a person...such a being.... Jack couldn't even pretend to understand. He could only try to lighten his friend's burden.

"Take it easy, Nick. It's only for a few days and Schanke will probably keep her so entertained you won't have to worry about it."

Nick smiled at him. "You're probably right." He laughed heartily this time. "He certainly keeps me entertained, whether he means to or not!" He threw the paper towel into the waste basket. "I'd better go. We're going to get Franco for questioning."

*

The heat of the day rose from the streets as Nick picked up his partner and they drove through the city to get their suspect. The motion of the car caused a breeze, but it, too, was warm. They were headed for the worst part of their precinct and the growing deterioration of each passing neighborhood visually marked their approach to their destination.

"See what you get," Schanke scolded Nick, "for saying what you did earlier? We get stuck with the rookie!" It seemed their new 'observer' did not sit well with Schanke either.

Nick looked over at his partner and laughed. "You're not getting mystical on me, all of a sudden, are you? Just because I teased you earlier that Collene might make a better partner than you..."

"Just keep it up!"
"...and of course, she's got to be an improvement over having to see your ugly mug every night..."
"That's it!" To Nick's surprise, Schanke seemed really mad. "When we get back tonight, I'm putting in a request for a change of partners. I'll take Sullivan and you can have the rookie!"
In wide-eyed disbelief, Nick stared at his fellow officer and didn't know what to say. Then he burst out laughing. "I'm sorry, Schanke. I was just joking. What's the matter, couldn't you tell?"
Looking back at his partner, Schanke relented. "Yeah, I guess. It's just so damned hot," he complained. "Why couldn't you have had air conditioning put in this 'rolling condominium' of yours?"
"I don't know," Nick said. "I guess the heat doesn't bother me." He smiled. "It just makes me lazy."
"Well, it seems to have the opposite effect on everyone else. It makes most people short tempered and irritable. That's why we're in the middle of this crime wave.
"Take this shooting for instance. The Muerte Negro and the Perreros Locos were really trying to settle their differences when they made peace a few months ago. But that was around Christmas, in the winter. Now it's the middle of summer. The heat's unbearable. So, something little happens, tempers flare, sparks fly, and blam!" He shot Nick with an imaginary gun. "There goes the peace."
Could it've been that simple? Nick wondered. He remembered watching the perpetually cold, hard face of Vinnie Mancuso, as it slowly, tentatively, warmed into a smile when the leader of the Muerte Negro finally shook hands with his mortal enemy, the head of the Perreros Locos, Luis Santiago.
Nick had played his part in being a neutral go-between, but it had been Vinnie who had convinced Luis that they were both part of the same, proud Hispanic race. They'd been fighting each other needlessly when there was so much more around them, trying to keep them down. Nick would never forget that night nor the impassioned speech Vinnie had given that had won over Luis. Although they wouldn't disband their respective gangs, they both swore they'd use their men to uphold the peace rather than disrupt it. And they had meant it.
It had been strange. When he had first met Vinnie, Nick had had the strong, immediate reaction of "knowing" him. Without a word he had understood him. And Vinnie had also seemed to have the same reaction to Nick. After learning of Vinnie's history, Nick realized why. In one very large respect, he and Vinnie were very much alike.
For a man still fairly young, even in human terms, Vinnie, like Nick, had seen--and been party to--much, too much, bloodshed and death. Nick instinctively knew, ironically, that the gang leader had grown to abhor killing just as much as he had.
Vinnie had grown up in the Muerte Negro. His older brother had been its original leader and when he was killed by the Perreros Locos, Vinnie had sworn revenge. Only after many years of living with this madness and after the tragic deaths of more family members, did Vinnie finally come to his senses. He promised his mother, who was grief-stricken by the more recent deaths of his younger siblings, that he would put an end to the killing. He promised her he would make peace. He would send for her sister's son, his younger cousin, to come and live with them and once again, they would have a family.
For what Vinnie tried to do, Nick had great respect for him. The detective knew that living such a life would either harden a person or make him determined to do something about it. Vinnie had chosen the latter. On that fateful day, when the Muerte Negro/Perreros Locos truce was made, Nick's respect for Vinnie grew to admiration. If a mere human could turn such a desperate situation around, then surely there might even be some hope for someone who seemed as totally irredeemable as himself.
Perhaps his personal feelings regarding this case colored his judgment, but something still didn't seem right to Nick. Knowing Vinnie, it wouldn't have been

something as minor as the heat to cause a break in his much-prized peace. Nick was missing...or overlooking...something. What was it? And how was Vinnie's life-long friend and second in command, Franco Garcia, involved?

"No," Nick said to Schanke. "There's got to be more to it than that. The heat might not've helped, but it's not enough to cause this."

"Maybe, maybe not. I guess we'll soon find out." Schanke started drumming his fingers on Nick's passenger door. Suddenly, looking at Nick, his face brightened. "Oh! Nick!" He said with undisguised enthusiasm. "I have a great idea! I've got a cousin visiting the wife and me and she doesn't know anyone in the city. Tomorrow's Saturday and we've both got the weekend off for a change. Why don't you come over and we can all go to the beach? We can have a barbecue and make a day of it. I think you'd really like her."

Too late, Nick remembered the warning Jack had given him earlier. He hadn't really taken note of it, he realized, because at the time he had been too preoccupied with the thought of eating.

"Uh...well, actually, Schanke, I have a lot to do tomorrow," Nick said, "and I've already promised Brunetti I'd come in on Sunday to help out."

"Ah, Nick. You're getting to be a real workaholic, you know that? What are you trying to do? Make the rest of us look bad? Give yourself a break."

"Sorry Schanke."

"Hey," Schanke eyed him suspiciously, "is this a conspiracy? Have all you guys been talking behind my back? I know I'm no glamour puss, but my cousin doesn't look a thing like me and if you all think she's a dog, you're sadly mistaken. You guys'll be the ones that are sorry."

Nick looked at him and was about to deny everything, when someone caught his eye. "Isn't that our guy?" He pointed to a man walking on the sidewalk ahead of the car.

"Yeah," Schanke said, sitting up in his seat.

Nick drove the car just ahead of the suspect and stopped. The suspect, seeing them, turned back the way he had come and started running. Schanke jumped out of the car and chased after him. Nick turned off the engine, grabbed his keys, and took off after his partner and the suspect. He saw them disappear around the corner of a building and then heard shots. Reaching the building, Nick drew his gun. He peered around the corner. Schanke was lying on the ground. The suspect was nowhere in sight.

Nick ran over to Schanke and knelt down. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah!" Schanke cried through clenched teeth. He raised himself up on an elbow. "He got me in the leg."

Nick could see the tear in Schanke's pants' leg where the bullet had gone through and the deep red bloodstain that was growing larger by the second. He swallowed hard and looked away. "Did you see where he went?" he asked Schanke.

"In there," Schanke pointed to a condemned building at the end of the block.

Nick stood up.

"Hey! You need backup!"

Nick looked at Schanke for a moment, then at one of the bystanders that had gathered around them. "Call the police," he ordered. "Tell them an officer needs backup...and a doctor."

"Nick!" Schanke cried, "Wait for the backup!" Too late. His partner had already disappeared down the dark street.

*

Franco hid in the darkness of the large front room of the condemned building, too scared to move. Why'd he panic? He chided himself. He was stupid! Stupid! He'd shot a cop! He'd seen him fall! God, he hoped he hadn't killed him.

Things had happened too fast. He'd been crazy to kill the kid, but trying to hide it from Vinnie was the hardest thing he'd ever done in his life. As soon as he saw the cops, he knew that they knew. Now everyone would know he'd done it, including Vinnie. He'd shown his own hand.

To make matters worse, he was in this creepy old building. It was hot and

stifling and he could barely breathe, but that didn't bother him half as much as the stories the place was haunted.

In its heyday, the building had been a very successful brewery, but then, some people had died in it under mysterious circumstances. After that, strange things kept happening until they finally shut it down. Even as a kid, when it first had been condemned, he'd been afraid of it. Weird things happened here, and if the cops didn't get him, something else would.

"Stop it," he told himself. He was Muerto Negro! He wasn't a little kid who believed in monsters in the dark!

Crouching in the back of what was once the office, behind some broken furniture, Franco told himself to calm down. It was just an old deserted building, nothing more. As he relaxed, he could hear the occasional breeze blowing through the broken windows, down the empty corridor and through the broken wall between the warehouse and the office.

He scanned the area again. Nothing had changed. Except for the patches of moonlight a few feet in front of him where a section of roof had caved in and a part of the wall had also been torn away, most of where he hid was in darkness.

There was that breeze again. This time it was a little stronger and he could actually feel the draft's coolness. The coolness felt good. It must get real cold in here late at night, he thought.

Man, he was tired. He hadn't slept for days. Even before he'd confronted the kid, it had eaten him up. Damn Tony! He hadn't meant to kill him, he just wanted to scare him away.

Franco shifted his position. He knew he should figure out what he was going to do, but he was too tired to think. It was as quiet as a church. He could hear every creak and moan in the old building. A feeling of peace came over him. He knew the cops would be looking for him soon, but for now, he just wanted to stay where he was. He laughed to himself. Had he really been scared of this place for so many years? Compared to the last few days, this was the safest he'd felt in a long time.

His eyes were drawn again to the patches of moonlight. Dust drifted down through them. The tiny particles sparkled when the light hit them. Then, the wind would pick them up and make them swirl around, in and out of the light. Like fairy dust. Franco laughed at the childish notion. Still, he couldn't take his eyes off of the spectacle.

It was getting chilly very quickly. He could see fog-like wisps of cool air being gently blown in by the wind, now mixing with the dust swirling about in the moonlight. He felt sluggish, his head cloudy. Were his eyes playing tricks on him now, or was he really watching a hazy shape being formed, the shape of a man? Was it just part of the broken wall or was there really someone standing there, half in moonlight, half in shadow?

The sound of the wind had grown louder too. It seemed to be calling his name. Franco shook his head, trying to clear it, but instead, it made him dizzy. At least he could see more clearly now. There was someone standing there, but he still couldn't make out who it was. He heard his name again. This time it came from the man. He recognized the voice. It was Vinnie.

"Franco," Vinnie called out again, "where are you?"

"Here, Vinnie," Franco said, standing up slowly.

Vinnie turned towards him. "I saw you shoot that cop. We've got to get you out of here."

Franco didn't move. Why'd he do that? Why'd he stand up? Now Vinnie knew where he was! Did Vinnie also know that he'd killed the kid? Man, he wished he could think!

"Come on, Franco," Vinnie said.

Franco still didn't move. What should he do? Vinnie wasn't acting like he knew. Maybe he didn't. But even if he did, they'd been blood brothers for life. Vinnie'd never turn him in to the cops...not even for this.

"What's wrong? Are you scared of me or something?"

"'Course not." What could Franco do? Trust Vinnie...he always did.

"Well, come on then. You're still my main man, right?"

"Yeah, Vinnie. I'm still your main man."

Franco put his gun away so he could climb over the debris he'd hidden behind. Why did he feel so light-headed? But he didn't want Vinnie to think anything was wrong with him, so he tried not to show it. He walked up to his compadre and then, something weird did happen. His head finally cleared...and he was looking at a stranger.

"You're not Vinnie!"

"No." Nick smiled, as he grabbed Franco's arm and turned him around to handcuff him. "I'm not."

*

Back at the station, Franco confessed to the killing of Tony Mancuso, Vinnie's cousin. Nick called Vinnie in to identify the body.

Vinnie nodded solemnly when Jack lifted the sheet from the face of the victim. Jack covered him again.

"Where's Franco?" Vinnie asked the detective standing beside him.

"He's being processed," Nick said. "You won't get to see him tonight."

Vinnie slammed his fist against the end of the cold steel table his cousin lay on. "I should have known! This is all my fault!"

"I'm sorry, Vinnie."

Vinnie laughed, mirthlessly. "You remember, Nick, what I said last time I was here?"

"Yeah, I remember."

"I said the war was over. I thought it was finally safe enough for the kid to come and live with me." Vinnie shook his head. "It's never over. Life's the war and it's not over 'til you're dead."

He sighed. "Franco never told me how he really felt. I never knew he hated Tony so much. You know what really hurts? Franco lied to me. I asked him last night if he knew where Tony was...if he knew if something happened to him...and he told me straight out, he knew nothing about it. Hell, Franco and I have been blood brothers since we were seven years old! I could kill him! I can't believe he did it! I feel like I've known him all these years...and I've never known him...that he could turn on me like this...he's a stranger. Tony's my blood...my real family. How could Franco do this? After all we've been through...it was all for nothing."

He looked at Nick with haunted eyes. "What do I tell my mother...and Tony's?"

*

"It was something Schanke said and the fact that Franco shot him that finally tipped me off to what must've happened." Nick explained to Jack when they were alone again.

"What did Schanke say?"

"He said his cousin didn't look a thing like him. I began to imagine what Schanke's cousin would look like if she did look like him." Nick smiled, "but then, when I was thinking about the victim, it dawned on me who he must've been. Vinnie had told me about his cousin when they made peace with the Perreros Locos. That's why the kid looked so familiar. Their family resemblance is very strong. I don't know why I didn't see it sooner.

"Franco confessed he killed Tony because the kid was 'taking over', not just his place with Vinnie, which meant his place with the Muerte Negro, but worse, he was making a play for Franco's 'on-again, off-again' girlfriend. Even though they were 'off-again', Franco still considered her his girl. The thing that was hardest for him to swallow was that his girlfriend and Tony were closer in age than Franco was to the girl, and everyone, including Vinnie, was trying to get them together."

Jack looked at Nick. "Mahoney said that Franco was acting weird around you...that you had to leave the room before he'd talk to anyone. He kept saying you 'formed out of the mist'. What was that all about?"

Nick cleared his throat. "He must have been seeing things," he said. "It was dark, he was under a lot of stress, probably needed sleep, who knows?"

"Is that what you told Mahoney and the others?" Jack's face hardened. He looked Nick in the eye. "This is Jack you're talking to. Franco said he was standing only a foot away from you and you were Vinnie...and then you weren't."

"Alright," Nick admitted, "something a little strange did happen, but no one was hurt. He just thought he saw something that wasn't there."

"Oh," Jack said, feinting innocence, "just a moment of insanity?"

Nick looked at him. "And what would you call murder?"

Jack relented. "Nick...you know this isn't good for you..."

"Yeah, I know I have to watch it..."

"Watch it? You can't do it! Ever again! Whatever you can do as a..." Jack stopped, went to the lab door to make sure no one was within earshot, and lowered his voice, "...vampire, you have to stop. Just like the blood, every time you practice vampire traits, it keeps you from changing."

"Yeah," Nick replied, quietly. "I know." He looked at Jack. "You don't know how hard that is. What I can do comes as naturally to me as breathing does to you. I know I should stop, but it shook me that Schanke was shot...and bleeding. Franco was already a nervous wreak. I didn't want to freak him any further. I didn't want a shoot-out." He hesitated, before admitting, "To be truthful, I wasn't sure that I wouldn't shoot him in the leg, just to get even."

Surprised, Jack looked at him and asked, "For Schanke?"

"Okay," Nick admitted, looking away, slightly sheepish, "I like the guy...after all, he is my partner." He looked back quickly at Jack and added, "But don't you tell him that."

Jack laughed.

"Speaking of Schanke," Nick said, purposely ignoring Jack's laughter and looking at his watch, "I'd better get going. I promised I'd pick him up from the hospital tonight and take him home. I told him I'd fill him in on what happened. I guess it's only fair, since it was his remark that helped me figure it out."

Jack clapped Nick on the shoulder. "Looks like you're on your own again," he said in mock regret, "for awhile at least."

Nick smiled. "It's tough, but I'll try to manage."

Jack laughed. "See you tomorrow night."

"Oh no!" Nick exclaimed, as it finally struck him. "Tomorrow night!" With a look of horror on his face, he reminded Jack, "Tomorrow night, I'll have that rookie 'observer'...all by myself!"

Jack was speechless as the infinite possibilities...the infinite possible complications...sank in. He watched as his friend's eyes narrowed. Then to his surprise, Nick exclaimed, "Schanke! I'll bet he planned this! He got hit on purpose, just to teach me a lesson!"

"...ah, Nick, I don't think..."

"Well, he'd better not be laughing about this!" Nick grabbed Jack by the shoulder. "You've got to help me think of a way to get back at that rat!" Looking at his watch, he released Jack and hurried towards the doors. "Something to scare him to death, but not really kill him. I'd love to teach him a lesson for a change! We'll talk about it tomorrow. 'Nite, Jack!"

Watching Nick leave, Jack shook his head. He smiled to himself. Three short weeks ago, he hadn't really thought it would be possible, but in spite of all the odds, the impossible did happen. Knight and Schanke really were partners.

- The End -







Perrin '92

THE INTREPID VAMPIRE-KILLER

by

Diana Smith and Pat Dunn

Antos Tolek sat upon a fine white stallion, quietly pleased with himself. The vampire-beleaguered citizens of the last village had been exceedingly grateful for his services and had rewarded him with a heavy pouch. Remembrances of the voluptuous young woman who had shown her gratitude--with her father's blessing--and the bottles of wine caused the vampire-killer to smile. His reputation was spreading, and he was usually welcomed with open arms. It was surprising just how many villages were troubled by the monsters.

Antos had literally fallen into his trade, accidentally killing his first vampire while working as a grave digger. Words of his great deed flew faster than a hawk, and requests for his assistance began to arrive.

He had saved many villages and now was on his way to Warsaw. Surely a city of that size would have need of his services, and many wealthy people to show their appreciation.

It was nearing dusk, and he decided to find an inn for the night. The roads were dangerous enough for a lone traveler, and a wise one did not risk them at night. The town was a fair-sized one, and he felt confident that he would find a fair-priced room.

The public room of the inn was doing brisk business, crowded with the noisy drunken men and women of dubious reputation. One barmaid caught his eye, and as Antos found a table he motioned for her to attend him.

A wild tangle of silky black curls framed her lovely face, and a low-necked blouse displayed her charms. Lush red lips formed a pout and luminous black eyes looked him over. Antos dropped a gold coin in her enticing cleavage and ran a finger along her cheek.

"Food and wine, my lovely," he ordered, leaning back and smiling at her.

She lowered her lashes and gave a seductive smile. "Is that all you require?"

"For now," he said, patting her bottom. "Once I've eaten I'll be wanting a bed."

"And someone to warm it?"

"Of course."

She nodded, and turned to make her way through the crowd to fetch his order. Halfway to the kitchen, a giant of a man grabbed her, pulling her to his lap. She squealed a protest and struggled to free herself as he made free with her, pawing those charms that Antos had just paid for.

Leaping to his feet, the vampire-killer rushed to protect his claim.

"What's this?" the noble-bearing man declared, fishing the gold coin from her bosom. His clothing proclaimed his wealth, his smug attitude his position.

"Tis mine!" the barmaid cried, grabbing for the coin he held just out of her reach.

"Leave her be," Antos said, glowering at the interloper. "Take your turn--sir."

The dark-haired man raised an eyebrow and looked coolly at Antos, never loosening his grip on the protesting woman in his lap. "I rather think *you* will

be the one to do that, fellow." To the barmaid he added, "I can pay you three times what this rogue has given you, sweetling."

"No--let me go!" she shrieked, flailing at him with her free hand.

Antos drew his rapier and pointed the tip at the gentleman with the poor manners. "Let her go."

The man's response was to fondle the barmaid's breasts and nuzzle her neck.

"I said let her go."

The man drew back from her and stared at his challenger when the rapier nicked his chin. "You wish to fight over a whore?"

"No, but the lady has accepted my offer and she has requested that you let her go," Antos replied, letting the rapier rest against the man's throat. "Now."

"I can always buy her later," the big man said with a shrug, pushing her from his lap. "Women like her are always available--for a price."

The barmaid stumbled up, then whirled and slapped the seated man across his cheek, the blow leaving a vivid red mark.

"Thank you, sir," she said to Antos, turning and flouncing off towards the bar.

"You have purchased a handful, good sir," the nobleman said, hand to his cheek. "I hope you are up to handling her."

"You may rest assured on that score, my friend," Antos said, chest swelling a bit. Having won, he began to feel magnanimous towards his rival. "Come, let me buy you a drink--wine, perhaps?"

"My thanks, but I don't drink wine," the man said with an enigmatic smile.

"As you wish," Antos said, shrugging, his eyes on the barmaid's lush figure as she returned with a tray. He just might pay for a full night...

"When will you be finished?" the dark-haired man inquired, patting the barmaid's bottom. "With *him*, I mean?" He smiled as she glared down at him.

"Not till dawn," Antos put in, as the woman opened her mouth. "If you're willing, that is, mistress?"

"Hmph," she said, tossing her head. "It's expensive for the whole night."

"I can afford it," Antos said, grinning as he hefted his purse in the palm of his hand.

"Well then," she said, patting his cheek. "I'm willing." She went off, leaving the men glaring at each other.

"Killed a vampire in the last village," Antos said, puffing up a bit. "That's what I do, you know. Perhaps you've heard of me--Antos Tolek, Vampire-Killer."

"Do you, really? What an odd occupation," the gentleman said, eyes narrowed. "Do you just go about killing them willy-nilly, or only as requested?"

"Oh, generally on commission," Antos said, draining his wine cup. "Though I've no aversion to cleaning up the odd stray Undead whenever I come across it." He glanced at the other man. "You needn't smile, sir. I assure you, vampire-killing is no laughing matter. Poland's rife with the creatures!"

"Is it, indeed? I've not noticed any around here," the man said, shrugging his shoulders and acting indifferent.

"You might not notice them," Antos said, his tone arrogant. "Takes a special fellow to see them when they're trying to hide. Vampires are slippery creatures, the Devil's own."

"Ah, I see. So you are an expert?"

"That I am," Antos agreed, refilling his cup and taking a long drink. "I can spot one in an instant. Why, I can even smell 'em! Creatures have a vile smell, you understand."

"How fascinating," the gentleman said, leaning his elbows on the table. "Just how would you describe this odor?"

"'Tis their breath, you see. Smells like rotten meat. And their eyes glow red, like hot embers. Great long teeth, like fangs, protrude from their mouths and they use these teeth to rip out men's throats."

"As you describe them, they do sound like monsters," the man agreed, a hint of a smile curving his lips.

"They are that," Antos said, nodding his head vigorously. "I'm doing a great

service in ridding the world of them!"

"Not everyone is so fortunate to have such a noble calling." The man leaned back in his chair, crossed one booted foot over the other. "I suppose you use the usual methods to dispatch these vampires, eh?"

Antos nodded and speared a chunk of garlic sausage with the tip of his knife. "Stake 'em and cut 'em," he said, cramming the meat into his mouth. "Never fails--especially after I've burnt the head."

"Yes, I suppose that would be sufficient," the man said after a moment. "Have you ever erred? Killed an innocent party, I mean?"

"They were vampires," Antos insisted, spearing another chunk of sausage and offering it to his companion. "All the signs were there."

The bigger man shook his head, held up a hand to indicate his refusal. "I have already dined, thank you."

Antos shrugged, stuffed the sausage into his mouth and began to chew. Grease ran down his chin and he swiped at it with the back of his hand, then gulped down some wine, oblivious to his companion's sneer of disgust.

"Are these creatures male or female?" the man asked, his face carefully composed to hide his feelings.

"Oh, either--both," Antos said. "Sometimes a vampire takes on the form of a bat, cat or wolf. It varies."

"Interesting," his table companion remarked. "Tell me--do you smell any vampires around here?"

Antos considered, then shook his head. No--this town's clean."

"How reassuring," the big man said.

The barmaid brought another jug of wine, setting it before the vampire-killer. "Do you wish anything else?" she asked, batting her lashes seductively and leaning forward to give him a tantalizing view of her bosom.

Antos grinned, and reached for her breast. She drew back, head tilted as she gave him a warning look. "I'll pay, loveling, not to fear," he said, jingling his pouch of gold.

"Yes, he seems to be quite comfortable in the purse," the other man said, quirking an eyebrow at her. "Your--gent makes his living as a successful vampire-killer."

"Truly?" she said, eyes wide.

Antos made a show of false modesty.

"Have you--killed many?" she asked, glancing at the dark-haired man before returning her gaze to the vampire-killer.

"I have made the world safer," he boasted, putting an arm around her waist and pulling her to his lap. "This night you will be safe from any such creatures."

"That *is* good news," she said, allowing him to again fondle her breast for a moment. She ran her hands inside his shirt, kissed him and then drew back. "I'm to show you to your room whenever you are ready."

"Can you not feel how ready I am?" he laughed, grinding his hips against her bottom.

"Ummm--yes," she purred, delicately sliding up on her toes. She turned and patted his cheek, glancing down into his lap. "Quite ready, I should say. I'll go and make your bed--ready." She smiled and took hold of his hand, pulling him to his feet. "This way, Sir Vampire-Killer."

Antos grinned and allowed her to lead him to the stairs.

"I'll be waiting," the rival left behind called after them, a note of warning in his voice.

"You'll have a long wait, then, friend," Antos called over his shoulder, nuzzling the woman's neck. "A *very* long wait."

"We shall see," the man said softly, settling down at a table. "We shall see."

*

"You know, I haven't even asked your name, loveling," Antos said, sitting on

the bed and watching her remove his boots.

"You may call me Varina, if you wish," she said, bending her head to kiss his toes.

He caught her by the arms, and pulled her up to his lap. "And I am Antos Tolek," he said, kissing her as his hands removed her blouse.

"Such a strong name," she murmured against his lips. "You must be very strong and brave to kill all those vampires." She nuzzled his neck, just below his ear, her tongue delicately touching his pulsebeat.

He closed his eyes as a shiver of ecstasy coursed through him, her blouse down around her waist so her breasts were exposed for his pleasure. "Will you tell me about the vampires? They--excite me," she breathed, leaning down to tease his nipples with her tongue.

"They should frighten you, little one," he said with a moan, struggling to make his mind work. Her hands and tongue seemed to be in command, driving all reason from his mind.

"Do they frighten you with their power? Is that why you must kill them? Have you ever made love with one?" Her voice was low and sultry, mesmerizing him.

"Made love?" He shuddered at the thought, vaguely aware of her hands removing his trousers. "They are monsters, sweetling, vile creatures that drain the life from a man."

"Oh, but you are wrong," she purred, stroking the throbbing vein in his neck. "Am I so vile? Do you see a monster when you look at me?"

"Of course not," he said, gasping a little with the effort to gain control of his mind and body. "You--you are a beautiful woman..."

"Thank you. You would not wish to kill me then?"

"Never!"

Her lips were against the wildly throbbing vein, her tongue laving the tender skin. He arched against her, begging her to take him. He sobbed with pleasure when her sharp little teeth pierced the skin and she began drawing his lifeforce into her.

"You see, my little vampire-killer, we are not so bad after all," she crooned, raising her head and looking down at his pleasure-drugged eyes. "I have not harmed you, nor have I turned you into a monster. The little blood I have taken from you, you shall never miss, yet it will keep me alive. Would you begrudge me life? Would you take my life?"

"What?" he murmured, trying to focus on her face. "You shouldn't make such jests, little one--"

"I'm not jesting," she interrupted, holding him pinned with her dark eyes.

"But you're not--" Antos broke off, a sensation of horror paralyzing his mind and body. "You--a *vampire*?!"

"But surely your expertise in such creatures has already told you that," she said, stroking his cheek and throat. "Do I not fit your conception of the monster you hunt down and destroy?"

"No... He put you up to this!" Antos cried, staring at her.

"He? Oh, do you mean the gentleman who harassed me? Did not your expertise tell you anything about him? You see, he is my husband, and he assured himself that it was safe for me to bring you up here," she said, leaning down so her warm breath caressed his cheek. "If he had felt there was any real danger to me, he would have insisted on 'purchasing' my services for five times the amount you paid. Naturally I would have accepted his offer."

Now he knew she was lying, for no man would allow his wife to act as barmaid and whore.

"I can see you don't believe me," she said, lush lips pouting. Her lips seemed a brighter red, and Antos realized with a start that the redness was blood--his blood. "We are not monsters, Sir Vampire-Killer. We never kill, never ravage, but rather make the sharing of life a pleasant experience. Often we leave our partners happier and in better circumstances than we found them. Have I harmed you? No. Have I terrorized you? Well, perhaps for the moment, but it was not intentional. When I leave you here, you will not feel fear or terror but only peace of mind and satisfaction with our encounter. I *have* given you pleasure,

have I not?"

He managed a nod, forehead breaking out in a sweat. If she *was* a creature of darkness, she could rip his throat out in a blink of an eyelash. His breath began to come in hard gasps, and she frowned.

"This is not right," she said, stroking his brow. "You must relax... Close your eyes, my pet."

Antos tried to fight her command but his eyes obeyed her. Her voice was sultry, seductive and pleasing, not at all what he had imagined a monster would have. Her touch was not that of a monster, either. How could a monster create such waves of ecstasy and pleasure?

"That's better," she crooned, her lips once more at his neck.

Antos gave over to her, letting her work her will with him. When she drew back and left him, he drifted off to sleep and in his dreams he continued to experience her pleasure.

In the dimly-lit hallway, Antos' rival waited for her. The handsome man drew her into his arms, his lips kissing away the traces of blood from her lush mouth. "Did it go well, my heart?" he asked, dropping a cloak around her shoulders.

"Yes, Nicholas, it went very well," she assured him, leaning her head against his chest for a moment. "I believe he will seek another line of work, and those of our blood will be safe from him."

"Not to mention the innocents he slaughters in his 'quest'," Nicholas said dryly, kissing her temple.

"Yes," she said with a sigh. "Killing rabid cats and dogs, desecrating an occasional grave where some poor soul has been buried prematurely, because the corpse was obviously not resting at peace..." She shook her head. "He knew next to nothing about our kind, Nicholas."

"I thought not," he agreed. "Varina, my heart--perhaps we ought to consider moving on within a year or two. Poland is rife with vampires, you know."

"Is it, really?" she said with mock seriousness. "Fancy that! Perhaps we should discuss this further--in bed?"

He grinned and flipped a coin at her. "It *is* my turn now, wench."

"Come along then, sir!" she said, tucking the coin in her bosom and taking his arm. "I am yours for the rest of the night."

He cupped her chin in his hand, stared down at the face which had become so dear. "Mine for the rest of our lives, my heart."

"That *was* why I came to your blood, beloved," she said softly. "To be yours."

Grasping her hands, he bent his head to kiss her lips then pulled her to him.

"Come, beloved," she said after a moment in his embrace. "I have shared life with the vampire-killer and now I wish to share love with the vampire."

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Antos Tolek groaned and put a hand to his forehead. He'd drunk too much, again... The memories of the night before came washing over him, and he shuddered. Maybe it was time to give up this life--he could sell the horse and his cloak, give the money to the brothers at the monastery in exchange for a place among them...

She must have been a succubus, he decided, wincing as he touched his neck. No vampire could ever look like her--to make him feel so...

Antos put the thought away and began dressing. He had a long ride ahead of him, and he knew he'd never kill another vampire again.

- End -


BARB '92

AUTUMN

by

Heidi Staneslow

You dropped the bright leaf.
We sat in autumn's twilight.
You said flatly,
"Autumn is the season for vampires."
My mind flashed through
Hallowe'en images: plastic fangs,
Red-eyed, red drooling masquers.
I smiled, shook my head
And looked to the ground.
You aren't like that at all.
You seemed to know my thought
As usual.
"No; darkness so early,
Moonlight so sharp,
Everything dying in splendor.
Three months of death. Yes,
Autumn is the season of death
And for undead."
Never had you spoken
So plainly of yourself, your kind.
"Then winter is death at its coldest."
I tossed an acorn off my boot.
"Autumn is death, yes,
But death in autumn
Isn't always final."

Then I realized my words.
"Isn't final," you echoed.
Your dark eyes glittered
In early moonlight.
You reached a pale, cool hand
Out to me.
I took it, not for the first.
Before, as then, as now.
No fear in me, only
Love. In your mind
Love burned too.
But in your dark eyes
Need: as before, I agreed.
Again your lips
Touched mine, my throat.
Again out of love, the
Need to love I offered, gave.
Again, in love,
You accepted, with care took from me.
Did hours or only minutes pass?
Now, so many
Years gone I don't remember.
But it's still clear to me
How, enlivened, you held me
In pleasure against the chill.
Years, seasons blur; you're here
Still, and, you promise,
Always, and I believe you.
But time sheds new light.
Moonlight now, and always
On that old thought.
Again you say those lines.
"Autumn is the season of death."
You remind me.
"And death in autumn isn't always final."
I reply.
You say, "It's autumn now."
It's our season, Love.


SHARON

A CURSE IN TIME

by

Sharon Wells

...Being the story of a confused and totally incompetent Vampire Hunter...

Martin clung to The Book. He had gotten it back from Nina Black, and he didn't intend to let it out of his hands again. She seemed very upset with him. 'Doesn't she realize I saved her life? Her soul?' he thought angrily. 'Ungrateful little bitch!'

He twitched his nose and went down to his car. He had used Nina's car to help drag it up from the ditch, and he had stood muttering beside it as, without a word, she slipped into the driver's seat and drove her car away.

His Mercedes was dented from the accident that had forced him off the road. He knew he was at fault. It wasn't exactly brilliant to drive a twisting mountain road and put on your sweat jacket at the same time. Still, he was angry about the car, too.

"I lost my job to come up here and save her skin, and this is the reward I get," he muttered, getting back into the car and slamming the door. "How come I never get the girl? Always that damned vampire gets them. It's just not fair!"

He turned the key and the engine reluctantly came to life. "I've had no sleep. I'm hungry. My car's dented." He continued to lament to himself as he steered his Mercedes onto the road. Like before, he was only half-paying attention to where he was going, but this time it was because he was so wrapped up in feeling sorry for himself.

The car was pulling to the right and he assumed that he had done something to it when he drove off the road. Almost unconsciously, he reached to clutch the heavy tome to himself, congratulating himself for destroying Vlad Teppish the Impaler, once again. He vaguely wondered if the dreaded vampire would find another way to return to the world. Martin took another sharp turn. He should have had both hands on the wheel, but he didn't. He was too busy juggling The Book and feeling sorry for himself. That was why he missed the turn and drove right off the road into empty space.

The car seemed to fall for a very long time. It gave Martin quite a good opportunity to panic. Yet, when the car finally hit bottom, the impact didn't totally destroy the vehicle, though it did knock Martin out for the second time in twenty-four hours.

Struggling to fight his way to consciousness, Martin heard a loud banging and crashing sound. He moaned and sat up. His first instinct was to reach for The Book. It had landed beside him, none the worse for wear. Straightening up in the driver's seat, Martin looked out to see a very ugly face staring in at him through the windshield. He did the obvious thing and yelled.

The face pulled back and Martin found himself looking at a rather stunned man wearing, of all things, chain mail and a blue surcoat. His head was covered in a Norman helmet, and his dark eyes were wide in amazement. "He's alive!" the man shouted.

"Well, get him out of that...box!" a domineering voice demanded. "Do I have to do everything myself?"

Martin saw that the first man and another dressed identically to him were drawing huge heavy swords. "Wait! Wait!" He opened the car door with some difficulty, and half-tumbled out onto the moist forest floor. He found himself looking up into the eyes of a man on horseback who was staring down his nose at Martin.

"Get to your feet. Who are you?" Sir Guy demanded.

Clutching The Book to himself, Martin Planting began to wonder if he had driven his car into some sort of Renaissance Festival site or one of those Society for Creative Anachronism parties. "I'm Martin Planting of Los Angeles," he introduced himself. He felt a little foolish for crashing his car twice now. "Who are you?"

"Los Angeles? Never heard of it. I am Sir Guy of Gisburne and you will address your superiors as 'sir.' Do you understand me, peasant?"

It was time for Martin to begin to wonder if this armored and mounted man was a little short on his marble count. "I'm not a peasant, I work for a..." he began.

"What is this...thing?" Guy gestured with one gauntleted hand to the Mercedes.

"My car."

"Your car...what?"

"My car...sir." Martin decided it was best to humor this guy. A suddenly perverse sense of humor lit his otherwise dismally dark mind. He held up The Book toward this fanciful *Sir* Guy. "I'm a professional vampire hunter, how does that grab you, *Sir* Guy?"

"A professional what?" Shifting in his saddle, Guy was beginning to wonder if this Martin fellow was some sort of sorcerer. They could often be obtuse and crafty. His eyes narrowed as he looked at the large book. He didn't read much, but the last book he'd seen had done something strange and, if he admitted it to himself, frightening. It had belonged to that troublesome de Talmont, and had bespelled Robert de Rainault. Guy was not soon to forget the Sheriff's chilling ramblings.

"Vampire hunter. Here...look." Martin flipped open to the marked page with the wood block illustration of Vlad the Impaler. "See this guy, he's a vampire."

Sir Guy squinted down, then looked more closely. "That's Robin Hood," he insisted. "You say he's a...vampire? What exactly is a vampire?"

"He's someone incredibly evil who drinks blood." Martin was warming to his subject, but reality set in and he decided to wrap things up. "I'm having a wonderful time shooting the breeze with you, but could you tell me, is there an AA nearby I can call about my car?"

"You're coming with me," Guy announced. He gestured to the two soldiers. "Escort our...guest to the castle. I think the Sheriff will want to question him about Robin Hood."

The two burly soldiers came up alongside Martin. He shrugged. Well, if they were taking him some place where there was a phone and food, he wouldn't argue. "I don't suppose there's a burger stand around?" he asked the guard on his right.

The man looked suspiciously at him, but didn't reply.

"This is quite a charade you have going here," Martin complimented Guy. "Your costumes look real authentic."

In a matter of moments, they left the sheltering trees and ahead Martin could see Nottingham Castle upon its rise of stone.

"Wow!" he breathed. "What a setup. You guys must have mucho bucks to construct something like that. I didn't even know it was up here. I bet it would help the tourist industry if you just advertised."

Sir Guy was tempted to tell the odd little man to shut up, but there was that possibility that he was a meddler in the black arts, so Guy wisely kept his mouth shut.

They passed through the gates of Nottingham and into the courtyard of the Castle proper. Guy dismounted and gestured for Martin and his flanking escort to follow him inside.

Despite the warmth of the day and the clarity of the autumn air, the interior

of Nottingham Castle was dark and gloomy, and a layer of internal smog created by the constantly burning fires and candles made the air somewhat murky. Martin wondered how far this particular group of people went with their play-acting. There was filthy straw on the floor. The people all stank like they hadn't been introduced to Mr. Deodorant, and their clothes didn't look especially hygienic in appearance, either.

He followed behind the swaggering, blue-caped Sir Guy and looked ahead to the dais where a man sat with a bored look on his bearded face.

"My lord," Sir Guy called ahead. "I found someone in the forest outside of town I think you should speak to."

"What now, Guy?" de Rainault asked, raising his eyes to look at the mousy little man following his steward.

"This person claims to be a vampire hunter." Guy kept his face straight as he spoke. "He has a book with Robin Hood's likeness in it. He claims that Robin Hood is one of these...vampires, my lord."

"Oh, does he?" The Sheriff sounded more awake. He stood and walked down the steps to the floor level. He stood slightly taller than Martin, staring down at the bizarre clothes his latest 'guest' was wearing. "A book?" His dark eyes darted to the large tome.

"Yes. Here." Martin laid the book down on a nearby trestle table and opened it to the illustration of Vlad Teppish. "You see, he was known as Vlad the Impaler in his own country. Here, you see?" He flipped to the gory illustration of bodies dangling helplessly from huge stakes. "He killed his enemies by impaling them."

The Sheriff began to smile. "I always knew he was too good to be true. So here's his real nature, hey Guy? A bloodthirsty... Where was this? Newcastle? Cornwall?"

"Transylvannia," Martin said helpfully.

"Where?"

"Rumania." Martin continued on, blissfully unaware that the Sheriff had no idea where this supposed country was. "He was a terrible war lord. He killed his enemies by the thousands. Now he lives by drinking the blood of the living. He's a vampire. Surely you know what a vampire is?"

The Sheriff ran his tongue over his teeth. He'd never heard of anything so outrageous. "I think the church would be interested in what you have to say." He looked over at Guy. "Send a messenger to my brother and ask him to come at once."

Guy inclined his head and went purposefully out of the room. De Rainault turned his attention back to The Book. "This is very peculiar writing. Who transcribed this? Each letter is so very tiny."

"It was printed," Martin told him, playing along with their zany medieval game. "Do you have a phone I can use?"

"A what?" De Rainault looked from the book to Martin. "Can you read this?"

"Sure. But, my car ran off the road back there, and I need to call for a tow truck."

It was all so much gibberish to the Sheriff. "I'll tell you what," he put a friendly hand on the lunatic's shoulder, "I'll get you some food, some ale, and you can begin to read this to me. Is that all right?"

Martin was hungry, so he nodded. It couldn't hurt to humor this guy. He seemed to be in charge around here.

"So, that means that Robin Hood is a witch?" Abbot Hugo was still a little confused about this whole vampire concept.

"No, worse than a witch, a demon, an undead...*thing* who lives by sucking the life from others."

Hugo's lips curled in distaste. "Well, Robert," he said to his brother, "I see that we have no choice now. We must declare Robin excommunicated. I will take the appropriate steps at once."

"How can you excommunicate someone who is a pagan to begin with?" the Sheriff asked patiently.

Hugo looked thoughtful. "We'll see." He gestured to two of the priest-clerks who had accompanied him. "I want a letter drawn up to His Grace, the Bishop of Leicester."

"Can I get to the phone now?" Martin asked, more than a little tired of this whole thing.

The Sheriff's eyes narrowed. "I'll have someone escort you to your chamber," he told Martin. He snapped a finger at the guards who were waiting near by. Martin reached for The Book, but the Sheriff's swift hands beat him to it. "I'll just keep this to...study it this evening," de Rainault told him.

Martin was getting angry. "Now just a dog gone minute. I've been real patient with you nuts, but I've got a life to get back to."
The guards had come up to flank Martin. They kept their eyes on the Sheriff, waiting for his orders to grab the little stranger.

"Soon enough," de Rainault smiled. "It's dark out. You can't travel in the dark. You told me yourself that the vampires are out in the dark."

"But I killed him." Martin looked up at the two guards. "I did. I killed him."

"I tend to doubt that." de Rainault's eyes raked the length of Martin Planting and found him an unworthy foe for Robin of Loxley. "Just allow me to...be your host for tonight."

Muttering to himself, Martin had little choice but to let the guards lead him to a cold drafty room in the east tower.

Of course, within a few days it was quite evident that Martin had lied about killing Robin Hood, and the Sheriff decided that the story about vampires must also be a lie. This Planting fellow was either mad or an inept liar.

*

Nina couldn't stop herself from crying. She hated Martin for what he had done to Max. The memory of her poor dead brother and the image of Max, wreathed in flames, crying out her name before he disappeared entered her mind and would not leave. None of what Martin had told her made any sense. On the drive to get his car, he had told her a wild story about a can of ashes exploding, but it seemed like the purest gibberish to her then.

Now, desperately unhappy, she wondered if she could beat the police to Max's house and find his ashes. She would have to act quickly, for she had already wasted time doing what Martin had dictated when she had allowed herself the luxury of wallowing in grief. As she picked up speed, she mentally calculated how long it would take the despicable Martin to drive to the nearest phone. His car hadn't looked like it was in the best of shape; maybe it was leaking some essential oily fluid and would break down before he did. She could only hope.

Little Tyler was being a remarkably good boy in the back seat. She wondered if he had any idea what had happened back there. Did vampire babies share their parent's pain? Or were they just like normal people, totally oblivious?

The mansion, now bereft of its glamour, came into view. It looked quite shabby in the light of day. She didn't notice. She decided it would be kinder to let the sleepy little boy take a nap. "Stay here," she commanded Tyler, as if the youngster had any choice in the matter. He was strapped into the child seat in the back and his eyes were drooping with fatigue. It had been a long night and morning for him.

Locking the doors of the car, she pocketed the keys and went back inside. The house was as quiet and empty as it had been when she left. She searched the floor boards in the area where Max had...disappeared. Now that she thought about it, he didn't seem to...die, if that was the correct words for the undead, in a normal manner. He had just suddenly poofed into a cloud of grey smoke and strange, electrical-red energy.

The floor looked remarkably ordinary. There weren't even any scorch marks. Blinking, she looked around the room. It was strange, but all the furniture, even the solid (at least it had felt solid) table she had eaten dinner on was gone. It had all just faded as Max had disappeared. No, she thought, not then, but a moment before.

She was no genius, but she was able to put two and two together. Nothing vanished when Tom had died, except Tom. And that had been very similar to Max, a puff of smoke and a strange electrical type energy. No body. Not even the real wooden stake that had been shoved through his chest by Cici was there. And where was Cici? Nina hadn't even noticed her disappear.

"Now let's think calmly," she said out loud. "If Max can cause illusions...." She began to wonder about how far his powers extended. After all, she asked herself, isn't he the King of the Vampires?

According to all the vampire lore she had ever read or seen in the movies, there had to be a secret, dark place for the vampires to rest in during the daylight hours. Of course, some authors, such as Saberhagen, allowed their vampires to move about in daylight, provided they wrapped up and wore wide-brimmed hats. She could only wonder where fiction ended and fact took over. Up until last night, she would have laughed at anybody who told her vampires were real.

"The dark can be so beautiful," he had said. Yes. She was sure it was true, especially to one of his kind. She must find his dark, secret lair. Silently she prayed that she would find his and not Tom's.

She went toward the inner wall of the large room and began searching for cellar stairs. It was not unusual for homes here in the mountains to have them. It was while she was in the hallway that led back to the kitchen, that she discovered a shallow closet in a strange place. It was strange, because there was another closet right inside the kitchen pantry area.

A slow smile spread across her lips. She began to search the closet thoroughly, pulling on broom handles, shuffling the things on the shelves at the back wall. It wasn't until she pressed upward against a shelf that she heard a soft click. The entire back wall of the closet moved silently inward, revealing the cellar stairs.

"Bingo," she whispered. She reached to flip on the light and was grateful that someone had seen the need to keep the bulbs in working order, for surely vampires didn't need light to see in the dark, did they?

With her heart beating in her throat, she made her way down the steep, narrow stairs. She hoped that she would at least find Max's coffin with earth from his native soil within. "...Or should I call him Vlad?" she wondered.

When she came to the bottom of the steps, there was a set of bars. When she tried to push against them, she found that they gave. She moved her hand over the wall, searching for another light switch. She found one and turned it on. Before her was a narrow hallway with four doors opening off of it: two on the left, one on the right, and one at the end.

Mentally she calculated where she was in relationship to the ground floor. The largest room, she decided, would be the one at the end, and since Max was into grandeur, she went toward that one first.

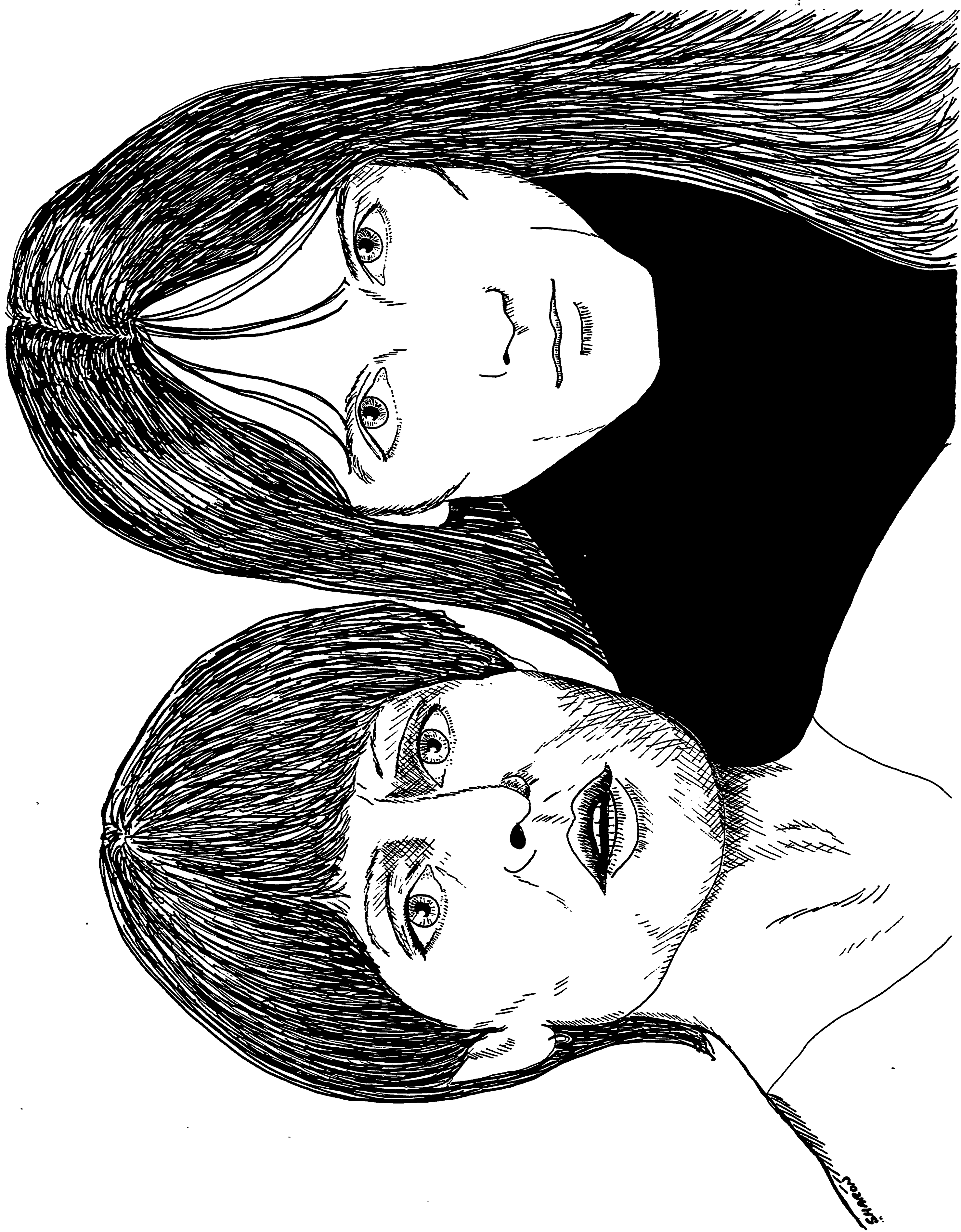
The door was unlocked. The handle gave easily when she pressed down upon it. She opened the door and looked inside. Much to her surprise, this subterranean chamber was furnished like a lavish bedroom. There were tapestries on the walls, thick, plush Persian carpets on the floor, and, on a small dais at the center of the room, a hand-carved ebony coffin.

"My God, they really do sleep in coffins!" she gasped. For a brief moment she wondered if she were doing the right thing. No, she was sure of herself. She had to find out as much as she could about Max. If there was a way to bring him back, she would find it.

There was a small table with candles, matches, and a candelabra by the door. She lit several candles, stuck them firmly in the candelabra, then lifted it over her head to illuminate the room better. She could just make out bookshelves on the far wall, now that there was more light.

She didn't realize that she was holding her breath as she approached the dais with the candelabra held overhead. Her heart was thumping so loudly in her own ears, that she felt even Tyler out in the car could hear it.

She stood looking down at her own reflection in the polished, black wood of the lid. Biting her lip, she gathered her courage and reached to open it. The lid moved easily and silently upward to reveal a red satin interior and...



She gasped, almost dropping the candelabra. Max was lying there, looking as if he was enjoying a peaceful sleep. There were no burns, no scars, just his incredibly beautiful face, his inviting lips, his long dark lashes resting against pale cheeks.

"Max," she cried, reaching tentatively to touch him with one hand. His cheek was cold...as cold as death. "Of course," she told herself, "it's still daylight."

Suddenly, she remembered the threat of Martin and the police. She carefully set the candelabra down, then tore out of there, down the hall, up the steps, and around and out to the car. She fumbled, feeling suddenly all thumbs, to unlock her car, grabbed Tyler, then dashed back inside.

When she got to the stairs, she turned around and shut the door until she heard it click. She could see that the release mechanism was visible from this side. She moved carefully down the stairs, past the iron bars, and back to Max's side. She placed Tyler, who was sleeping as if he were drugged, beside his father, then slowly leaned down to kiss Max. There was no response, but she hadn't expected him to awaken like Sleeping Beauty, either.

She blew out the candles, all except one, then set the candelabra back on the side table. She noticed that there was heavy vellum writing paper there and a beautiful, costly fountain pen. Just like him, she thought. Bending over, she quickly scribed a note to him, left it where it was visible, then left. She trusted him to protect Tyler. She just prayed he would not disappear with him.

By the time she finished, it was darkening with clouds outside and the hint of rain was in the air. Where were the police? she wondered. She was exhausted from the long night, but elated. Despite her brother's death, something that still caused her to feel a deep emptiness inside, she could save Tyler now, and somehow Max had survived.

She called the police station a little later to report her brother and son missing. They didn't seem to have a clue about the whole affair. She vaguely wondered if Martin had ever made it there.

"The stupid ass!" she cursed, thinking of the interfering, annoying little man.

That night, as storm clouds blew across the face of the moon, Max came to her while she lay wide awake in bed.

"Max," she breathed his name, afraid to move, afraid to blink, lest he disappear. He was so incredibly gorgeous and his complexion was more flushed than she had ever seen it, except after the time they had made love.

"You knew," he said, moving closer. When he touched her, she could feel that he was real, and she fell forward into his strong arms.

"I thought he had killed you...but none of it made any sense." She was crying, which made it difficult to speak. "I saw you burn."

"It's an old vampire trick to throw people off our track," Max told her, his voice a warm, velvet whisper. "I'm so sorry you had to suffer." He leaned his head against her hair as his hands made small circles against her back. "Tyler's downstairs in his play pen." He eased back from her and gazed down into her eyes. "You trusted me, Nina." His eyes lowered and his thick sooty lashes brushed against his cheeks, as long silken hair framed his face. "No one has trusted me in a very long time. You cannot know what that means to me. And you knew..." His gaze rose to meet hers.

"I began to think about all the things in your house...the way they disappeared. You made them real, didn't you?" When he nodded, she continued. "And you used that same power of...illusion to make yourself appear to burn up?"

"That I did. Can you forgive me for frightening you?" He was smiling down into her eyes now, as his long-fingered, graceful hands gently cradled her face. She nodded, and he continued, "I cursed Martin, too. I don't think we'll see him again. I've wished upon him the fate he had in mind for me, the little rat."

There was vehemence in his voice, reminding her that he could be very dangerous...lethal, in fact. "I hope you're right, Max. Did the police ever show up at your house?"

He shook his head. With an unconscious gesture, he tossed his long mane over

his shoulder. "I buried your brother. I'm sorry about that, Nina. Tom was such an ass. I'm sorry for what he did. But, we'll be safe now, just the three of us--you, me, and Tyler. You'll have to report him missing, as well. There will be no other way to explain the changes in him."

"I did already. I didn't want to have to face Martin if he realized what Tyler is, whose son he is." She wet her lips. "I want you, Max...in every way."

"For now, it is better that you remain able to move about in daylight," he told her as his eyes drank in her adoring expression, "at least until you can quit your job, sell your house, and move in with me." He held her in his arms, pressing her warm body against his. "You will join us, Nina, won't you? When the time is right? You will let me take you with us?" His voice was inviting, warm, magical.

"Yes, Max, as long as you keep loving me. You do love me, don't you?" There was an almost desperate hunger in her deep blue gaze.

His eyes were mysterious dark green pools that she could easily and happily drown in. "I will love you forever, Nina." He was aware of the feel of her warm, ripe breasts crushing up against the solid wall of his chest, of her hips urgently pressing against his, stirring his passions. He had eaten before coming to her, and he wasn't hungry for her blood now, only for her body and the erotic pleasures it could bring him. There would be plenty of time to bring her in, to make her one of them. They could do it gradually, one step at a time. Tonight, if she agreed, he would only taste her, sip from her, relish the warm life of her, share his blood with her.

Slowly he lowered her back down to the mattress as his mouth descended upon hers. His tongue brushed against her lips seeking entrance and she opened her mouth to him, drinking in his sweet kiss.

Her entire body was tingling with anticipation. "Don't wait, Max. I don't want to lose you again...ever." She clung to him and unconsciously moved beneath him with her need.

He rose up on his elbows and stared down at her face. "Do you want to share the blood first?" He wondered if she realized what he was offering her. Immortality. If he went slowly, it could take months to bring her in all the way. It was up to her.

"Yes, Max...yes." She arched her head back so that the white column of her neck was exposed to him. His body responded to the sight, his teeth lengthened, his mouth throbbed with the need to taste her. His gaze was riveted to the warm-blooded pulse point, as he slowly lowered his head, closed his eyes, and pressed his lips against the satiny skin there.

*

"What should we do with the lunatic?" Sir Guy asked, his thumbs tucked into the thick belt that hung from his waist.

The Sheriff sneered openly at the mention of Martin the Demented, as they were all calling him now. He waved a be-ringed finger. "Dump him in Sherwood. Perhaps he'll find his vampire, after all. The whole affair was a waste of my time."

Guy did not restrain the smile that tugged at his lips. He could just imagine the terrified Martin running from Robin Hood as if he were Death himself. "Very good, my lord."

Less than an hour later, Martin, minus his precious book, which Abbot Hugo had decided to keep and study, was tossed like a sack of potatoes into the forest near Wickham.

"But, where's my car? Listen, I have credit cards," Martin called after them as the soldiers shrugged and made superstitious religious gestures against insanity.

"Bastards!" Martin raised a fist and shook it after them. He turned around. "Where the hell am I?"

He wondered if he just started walking if he would eventually find civilization again. "Hello!" he called every so often as he slowly began to

amble along the narrow forest path. "Is anybody there?"

There were no answers and he continued walking and occasionally calling out.

"Robin!" It was Much. He came excitedly into camp, his face flushed from his run. "Robin!"

"What is it, Much?" Little John stood up and moved forward. Much looked beyond him to see Robin sitting casually beside Marion. He raised one dark questioning brow.

"The Sheriff's men came into the forest and dropped a man. I think he's a spy, or else he's crazy."

"A spy?" Nasir asked.

"We kill spies," Will Scarlet said, a wicked gleam in his eye. "Where is he?"

"He's on the road near Wickham. He's dressed very strange."

Robin digested this information, recalling a dream he had had just last night. In the strange dream, Robin saw himself, only he was a wiser version of himself and his hair was longer. His dream-double warned him: "A man will come to the forest armed with strange magic and determined to kill you. Seek to destroy him and all he stands for."

Rubbing his chin, Robin looked thoughtful. His dreams were usually correct, even if a little hard to fathom at times. This one seemed straight forward enough. He needed to kill this man who was armed with strange magic. "Another de Belleme perhaps," he told Marion. "You stay here. I'll take care of this."

She patted his hand and smiled. "One whole man. Are you sure you won't need me?" She was joking, having no idea of the evil threat this stranger might represent.

"I think Much and I can manage," Robin assured her. He turned to the others. "Nas, can you take over Much's watch?"

The Saracen nodded.

"Then, come on, Much, show me where this person is."

"Well, he was headed for Wickham," Much told him, as the two headed out of camp, shoulder to shoulder.

Martin was making the usual nuisance of himself in Wickham. He was demanding to know where the phone was or where he could find public transport. Edward ordered everyone to stay away from this odd man who spoke so strangely and made demands no one could understand. He was about to send a messenger to Robin about the intruder, when Robin and Much appeared from the deep shadows of the forest.

Robin had his bow strung, as if he anticipated trouble. Much pointed across the bridge at Martin, who stood in the middle of the road, ranting and raving about all the crazy people there.

As he approached Martin, the hairs on the back of Robin's neck began to tingle. Indeed, there was strange magic woven about this man, alien magic. He nocked an arrow without even thinking about it and came to stand about thirty feet away, reluctant to get closer.

Martin was totally frustrated. "Are you all just incredibly stupid or what?" he asked, turning in a slow circle. "Is it too much for ask for a little consideration? All I want to know is where I am, where a phone is... Is that too difficult?" He had his hands on his hips and he was looking from blank face to blank face, when his eyes landed on the man in green who stood a distance away.

"You!" he shouted, pointing a finger at Robin. He didn't stop to wonder how Vlad managed to be strolling about in the daylight. His one thought was, *Not again!* "I thought I killed you, you monster!"

Robin didn't understand exactly what Martin was saying, but he felt the wrath in the man's words. He wet his lips, waiting for this strange little wizard to do something.

"He's daft," Much commented, stepping to the side. He saw that Robin was poised, ready to fire in a heartbeat.

"I'll kill you once and for all," Martin threatened. He reached over, grabbed a wooden pitchfork out of a startled woman's hands, and went cannoning across the open space toward Robin.

Before Martin had gotten three steps, Robin fired. The wooden shaft of his

arrow sprouted from Martin's chest. Amazed, Martin looked down at it. "A wooden stake through the heart," he muttered to himself. "Not me...him...him." And with that confused sentiment, Martin dropped dead.

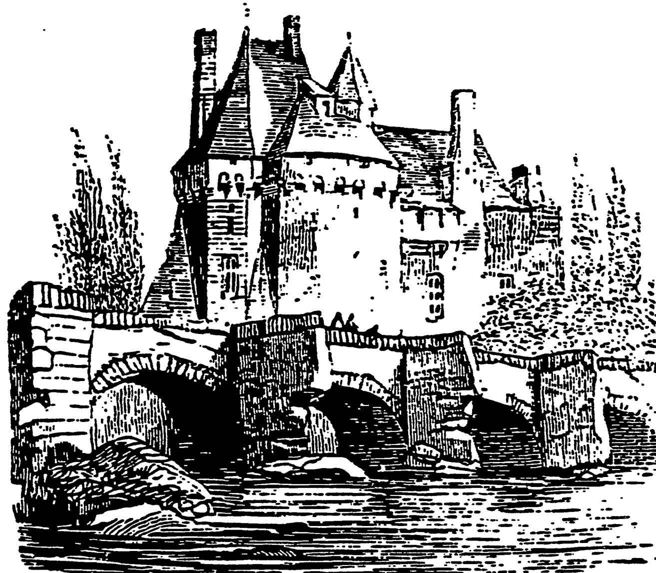
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Across the boundaries of time, Vlad Teppish, alias Max Schreck, lay sleeping soundly in his coffin with Nina at his side. He smiled to himself, revealing perfect, sharp, white teeth, then went back to sleep more soundly.

...And the Vampire got the Girl again...

- The End -

[Sharon Wells edits Robin of Sherwood--The Early Years, and her ROBIN OF SHERWOOD novel Robin of Loxley-- The Missing Years should be out soon. (See her full page information sheet at the end of this publication.) For fans of Michael Praed and of BEAUTY AND THE BEAST, she has written the alternate timeline, fantasy fanzines Abode of the Beast, Volumes 1 and 2. Sharon has also written two stories, "Gag Me with a Reel" and "Rewrite", based upon the roles created by Michael Praed, upcoming in Kaleidoscope from Pagan Press, P.O. Box 516, Midlothian, IL 60445.]



SEEKING DRACULA

by

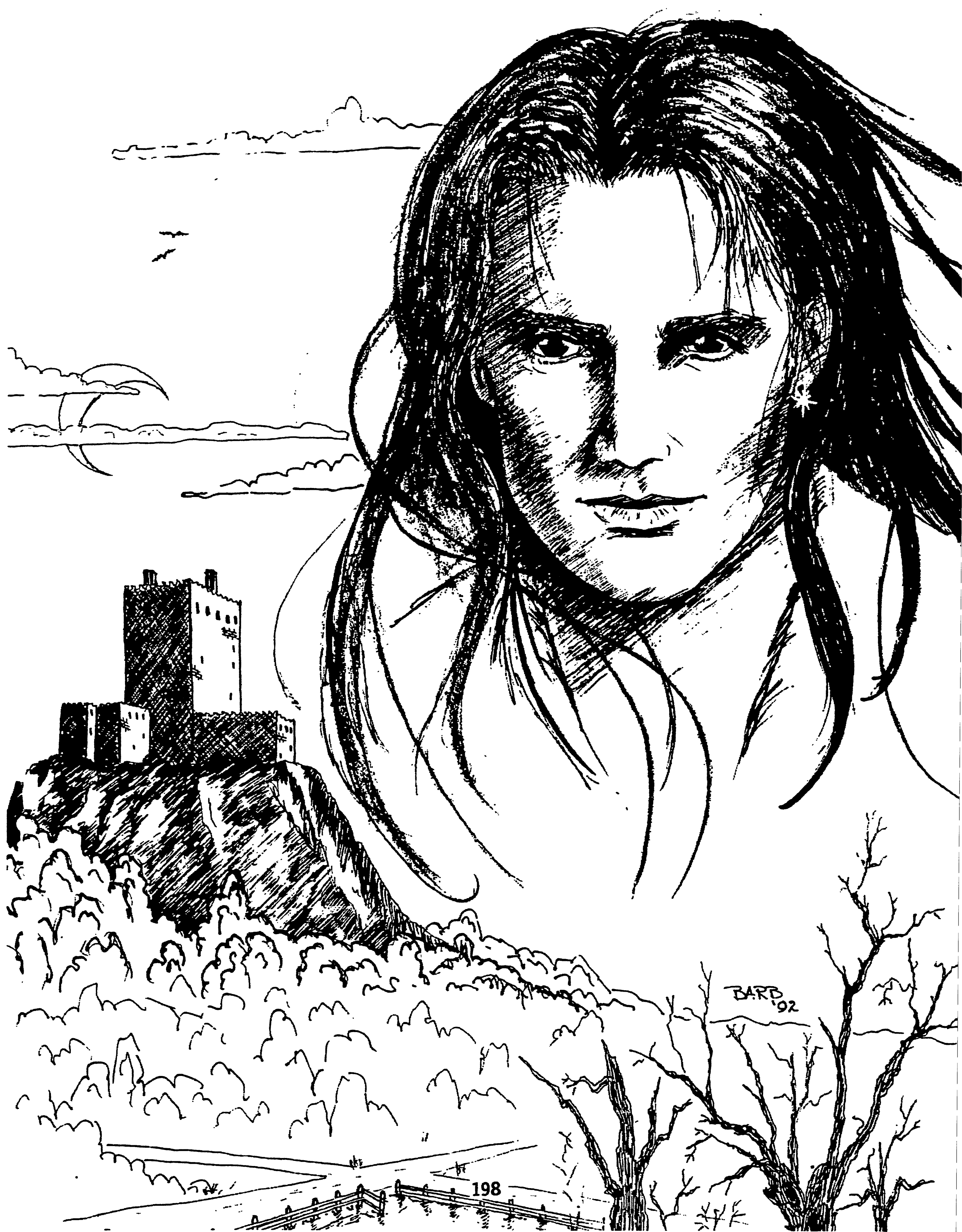
Judith R. Conly

1. Youth

Do you remember the edge of the forest?
where we played in the tatters of outworn leaves and clothing,
under the benign eyes of my father's home, and you boasted of the always-new splendor
that would attire your rule and your ruled.
The sweet free breeze carried, from tree to whispering tree,
your scorn of your lady mother's despair for your dignity,
and my regrets for motherless poverty.
The high door of your ancestral hold
was a frown that barred my low estate,
but we found in the crescent leaves a multitude of smiles
silhouetted against the sky of lazuli and coal,
blessing your lips' first hesitant touch on mine
and later the deeper dragon-kiss
that marred only briefly the sun-hidden pallor of my throat.
Compelled by the doubly turbulent call of our blood,
we sought the shelter of the wooded night,
where so long I awaited your love-sworn return,
from whose tender arms the need of you tore me at last.

2. Transformation

I could not fear you, nor stop my fear,
for beyond the gate of change you had passed in ignorance,
your footsteps echoed to eternity.
That night, the cusp, held us as close as you held me,
but the adamantine stars offered and demanded less than your eyes.
Through its cloak of flesh you cupped my heart in your hand,
and I could not refuse you the impassioned blood
that flooded through me only at your will,
much as my mind and teaching might protest.
My will sank, water-logged, into your depthless lake
and, still anticipating pain, I drifted blissfully unaware
as you drank my terror with my life,
leaving a too-brief moment of peace
to countermand long centuries of legend.
So, as ever, through a ceaseless procession of moons,
we shared and exchanged the essence of our lives
and, in the fullness of time, of other lives,
which we stalked together in the backwater land
of our extended youth, untroubled by demons.


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3. Journey

The autumn leaves fell like brazen tears
and I crushed their farewells beneath determined feet
and looked no more on the shadow-riven walls
of the castle you were the last to call home.
Across centuries of foreign lands
and forests of strange hostile stares,
I followed a trail of doors barred against night-hunting
spectres,
of mourning fathers of daughters bound with wild rose and garlic
  and stake,
of dormant disbelief awakened.
Legends-to-be in many infant tongues
lend new hope to my desperate heart
and new strength to my dragging step.
Balanced on a moving, growing wire
strung between mist-pillars of a memory and a dream
over a tormenting abyss of sunlight,
I must move on or wither where I stood,
starved of the blurring tender brutal smile
as much a blanket as my companion earth.

4. Hunting

It was a sere, forbidding land
among whose stars like a painted blizzard
I drifted, a shadow seeking a form to cast it.
I circled once beyond the rim of his attention,
regretting and blessing his youth and careless confidence,
before, now a silent unalerting mist,
I followed the scent of his aliveness,
extending a tendril-thought of comfort
to prepare him for the welcome of my presence.
My humanity, reflected through his eyes, fit me well,
and the power I wore like a second skin
muted his surprise and held alarm at by
as I bound his mind to mine and petrified his almost-melting limbs.
He tasted of wandering and incense and serenity,
like the alien future sea, of innocence and ignorant wisdom,
of kinship with millions, the banisher of loneliness.
And because of the soul-screaming anguish he gave me,
I hurled from me all well-intended generosity
and left him at the crossroads, in all his blanched mortality,
a specimen impaled on a stranger's gatepost.

5. Expectation

The years drag at my lonely heart like a snail its shell
and the mirrors of a myriad dayfly lives
are inadequate to reflect the subtlety of our changes.
Though the tapestry-world around me glows with new learning,
I am weary with the restless legacy of your absence
and long to feel again the ordinariness
that your knowledge alone remains to grant me.
Yet, even through this land's blind time of willful disbelief,
I will follow the clear signs of your passing,
knowing that though now even I must wrestle down despair,
and I sense you only through a parade of shuttered faces,
we can afford to keep patience until the crowd has thinned
and, leaving them behind with their centuries,
move in joyful triumph to our eternity.

[Judith R. Conly, Publication History (Poetry):

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EXODUS

by

Janet P. Reedman

He was lost; shadows swarmed around him. Darkness was his element, and he knew it could be beautiful--but there seemed little beauty in it now. And it was cold; odd as it seemed, the cold ate into flesh that should have long lost the ability to feel such a sensation. He shivered, reaching for clothes to draw around him, then realized he was naked.

For a moment he panicked, struggling to remember. Had he killed? He ran his hands over his chest, his mouth, then held them up before his eyes. The palms glowed blue-white in the shadows. No blood. His breathing, an apparatus used only to give him the semblance of normal humanity he craved and was forever denied, slowed considerably. He had not killed, had not broken the vow of bloodlessness he had made unto himself...

Slowly, fragments of past events began to burst into his mind, pieces of an obscene and difficult jigsaw. He felt his eyes burn, though tears were also something he had thought long ago lost to him. ***Nina, you are gone from me...and the sun, the fool let in the sun...***

He bowed over as a wave of pain and weakness flooded him, and he fell to his knees. He understood now. Once before, his flesh had been exposed to the sun, the cursed sun he craved and yet could never face, save in the dreams he had while lying in darkened chambers safe from the burning face of the day-star. And, as before, instead of dying he had become discarnate--a soul traveling free without a body. Lesser members of those which mortals named "wampyr" would have perished utterly in the sun's rays, but for such as Vlad Tepish, whom terrified serfs and terrified Turks had named "Dracula", Spawn of the Dragon, there was only a brief time of darkness, of emptiness, before a new body was assumed in pain and suffering.

A dark soul reborn with all the agony and travail of a natural birth.

I wish I had died... he thought bitterly, pressing his face into his hands, ***rather than begin this again, begin this quest for...what?*** Shaking his head to clear its swimming, he began to crawl upon the brittle pine needles that lay scattered below him, while his body screamed its agony, the perfect whiteness of his flesh belying the pain he felt--the pain of a man writhing in fire, being burned at the stake.... ***The stake!*** He winced at the thought, remembering the atrocities he had committed in his youth--the thousands impaled to serve as a warning: ***Vlad Dracul is master here!***

I pay for past sins every moment I live.... he mused, in that instant almost relishing the agony of his tortured flesh. A thousand such agonies would hardly suffice to atone for his crimes.

As he crawled onwards, he became gradually aware, through the blinding pain, that these woods felt unfamiliar. And then he realized he was no longer in the mountains of California. The lightnings that had ensnared him as the sunlight dissolved his form had taken what was left--the soul or spirit--and carried it far away. Where, he had no idea.

He also became aware, vaguely, that he was not alone. Someone was wandering through the woods; a strong presence, full of confidence. He did not know--at that



SHRECK/TEPEŞ

moment, did not care--who it was, or if they found him. Undeterred,he continued his slow crawl.

And then a man's face loomed above him, pale through the shadows. Dark hair, like his own, pale flesh, great dark eyes that sucked in the vague, wandering forest light. The man knelt by him, despite his feeble attempts to push him away.

"Do not fight me...I will help you," said the young stranger, kneeling and lifting him, then fighting to tear off his jacket to wrap it around the crouching man for warmth.

"I do not need your help." The voice, once smooth and beautiful, emerged a harsh croak.

"I think you do." The man hauled him to his feet, offering his shoulder as support. "Do not fear, my home is not far away. My lady, Michele, will be there to assist you. You may call me Stefan." Without listening to further protest Stefan lead the weak and trembling vampire through the dark fastnesses of the the forest.

Ahead the trees parted abruptly, dwindling to half-dead shrubs stunted by the wind. Between their clawing boughs a grim edifice came into view, perched upon a frowning rock--an ancient castle with impregnable walls and conical turrets still intact. Bats wheeled overhead, flying from hiding-holes in the age-pocked masonry to a lightning-blasted tree that stood on the slopes, or to the remains of an earlier gatehouse that defended the overgrown inner ward, like a fleshless skeleton guarding the later fortress.

"This is Castle Vladislaus," said Stefan, looking at the pain-wracked man who leaned heavily on his shoulder, "And this is my home."

The injured vampire glanced at the young man with startlement--and new understanding. "You...you are one..." he whispered. Then a darkness greater than any he could recall, as close to the nothingness of death as he had ever experienced, washed over him and he descended into the void...

*

"Max?" He awoke dreamily, staring up through a haze towards a swinging cup of lighted tallow suspended over the place where he lay. Someone was calling a name...a name that was his and yet not... "Can you see me, Max?"

He shook his head to clear it, forcing his vision to focus on the figure kneeling beside him. It was a woman, young and slender, with pale features and short dark hair. "Nina?" he said hoarsely, trying to rise, while his vision blurred and darkened and the light became auraed with red.

"Lie back, lie back!" insisted the woman. "You aren't ready to rise yet. What happened to you--the loss of your old body--has sapped your strength terribly."

"I burn," he croaked.

"I have been laving your skin through the night. In the day...I cannot, and so must leave you. I am sorry, Max."

"Who are you? I thought at first you were...Nina." He peered at her again, once more forcing his eyes to clear. He could see now that she only superficially resembled his mortal lover. Her hair was similar in style and colour, but her eyes were dark, and she was taller, longer-boned. She also bore an ethereal quality that spoke of more than mere mortality.

My name is Michele," she said simply. "I live in Castle Vladislaus. With Stefan."

"You are an American. Your accent..."

"I belong to no country now," she said, a little sharply. "Not now."

With an effort he reached out and caught her wrist. "You are one...of us, aren't you? You cannot hide it; it's in your face, your eyes."

She nodded. "Stefan made me. I wanted it so. I desired to stay with him for all time."

Max grimaced, haunted by memories of how this same offer had been flung back in his face. He forced the bitter memories away. "I sensed Stefan was a vampire almost at once, even in my illness. Like calls to like."

"Yes. He has borne the Curse of Blood for four hundred years. But he says that his age is no greater than yours--and he feels an odd power about you. He

wants to know who you really are, Max."

"You have my name." He lay back in what he now realized was a stone chest, a medieval cist used for burial at some remote period, and stared at the ceiling--green-veined stone crisscrossed by cracks. Ancient stone; he could almost smell the essences of past lives emanating from that worn masonry.

"The name you use," she murmured, her eyes veiled by a fringe of lashes. "We're not fools, Max. We know that your true name is something else. Max Schreck was an actor who played 'Nosferatu'."

He raised his head slightly, lips twisting in the parody of a smile. "You're correct, of course. But do not ask me again. I will not speak of my past unless it is necessary, and it is not."

Michele rose from the bedside, a vision of pale, fey beauty in the white robes she wore. "Whatever you want," she said in a soft voice, "but sometimes one cannot hide the past. Not forever."

She departed from the chamber, her feet making no sound on the chill flagstones. Shrieking on rusty hinges, a huge wooden door inched shut behind her. And Max Schreck, once prince of Rumania, dread lord of the Baltic region, lay back on his cushioned bed and stared at the ceiling, his eyes unblinking as a dead man's, no breath moving the coverlet spread across his chest. It was time to heal...and then he would see what life, such as it was in this unnatural form, would bring.

*

The sound of thunder rumbling over the grim slate pinnacles of Castle Vladislaus woke Max from the undead slumber that had gripped him for more days than he cared to count. Days? It could have been months, years... A sudden restiveness gripped him, and he yanked himself into a sitting position. He made a small sound of relieved surprise as he found the pain had gone from his limbs. He flexed the muscle in his right arm. No agony. The rebirth, the new incarnation, was complete. Silently he rose from his tomb-chest bed, his eyes cleaving the darkness like a cat's. Turning, he saw a chair draped with clothes--almost as if they had been left for him. He dressed in silence, inwardly approving of the garb--a loose white shirt, a maroon velvet doublet, dark trousers, long boots that reached the mid-calf. The garments were somewhat short for the length of his body; he supposed they were discards of the man, Stefan. "I must thank my host," he murmured, tossing back the dark hair that fell below his shoulders.

Opening the door, he stepped into one of the hallways of Castle Vladislaus. Torches burned in brackets on the wall, their oily smoke rising to stain the roof. Frayed tapestries hung askew on hooks; faded murals in the highly-stylized medieval Slavic style stared big-eyed at the passing vampire. Max shuddered slightly, averting his gaze. He was reminded of his past, of another castle much like this one, a castle where he had governed life and death and reveled in the monster he had become...

Eventually the corridor reached an end. Max walked into the spacious antechamber, which he supposed had once been the Lord of the castle's great Hall. A corbelled ceiling reared above; the floor was tiled in marble. A cavernous fireplace, stained black with ash, was built into one wall. He touched the iron brazier on the hearth. Cold. No one had lit a fire here for a long time. The bits of wood beneath his fingers crumbled to ash and blew away in a draft coming from the narrow arrow slits that served as windows.

A burst of thunder outside trembled the stones around him, and a flash of lightning sent slivers of brightness dancing across the floor. Max's eyes widened as they illuminated a large, dark stain on the floor. Intrigued, he walked over to it, and knelt. His pupils widened, darkening until they encompassed most of the iris of his eye. Blood. An indelible bloodstain. He ran his hand over the mark, sudden waves of weakness, nausea, and desire streaming over him. He groaned in misery, his innards knotting. He was so weak; he needed to feed in order to fuel the strength of this new body...

"Max, are you all right? He managed to turn as Michele appeared, holding up a

torch that dispelled the rest of the darkness from the room. She placed the torch in a rusted bracket and hurried over to the kneeling man.

"I am fine," he croaked, rising without the aid of the arm she offered, unwilling to show his weakness.

"I know what you need." Stefan's voice sounded from the door. The young man walked in, his dark eyes fixed on Max's pallid features. "You need...blood. It is time to feed."

Max took a deep breath, as unnecessary as it was for him. "You must understand," he said intently. "To kill...it is no longer my way. I will not take a human's blood unless it is willingly given. If you still feed in the Old Way, it is not for me to gainsay you, for you are not my people, though of my kind, but I will not compromise what I have come to believe. Do you understand, Stefan of Castle Vladislaus?"

Stefan nodded, lips touched by a faint smile. "I certainly do. For we, too, do not feed off men any more. We wish to live in peace, not to be hated and hunted."

Max looked at him in surprise. "How do you...survive?"

"I will show you." Stefan walked slowly over to a section of the wall and pressed upon it. A loud click resounded through the chamber, and a stone slab ground back on an ancient mechanism. Inside a hewn niche rested an odd conical object of crystal, capped by a silver lid. The contents of the crystal were a deep, luxurious red...the color of fresh blood.

"What is that bauble you hold?" questioned Max, moving to stand beside Stefan.

"This," replied the other vampire, his voice hushed with awe, "is the Bloodstone, which contains the blood of all the saints. The pope gave its keeping unto my family after we saved the folk of this region from marauders. The stone gives us the ability to feed without killing."

Max reached out with shaking fingers and touched the conical crystal. "I had thought it but a myth," he whispered hoarsely. "May I...?"

"I would not have brought it out if I would not offer its powers to you," said Stefan, pressing it into Max's palm

Max lifted the Bloodstone, staring fascinated at the red liquid swishing inside the crystal. His own reflection was mirrored back at him on the facets in the glass--his own beautiful image, tinged in red, much as he remembered it from times gone by. Maybe, with the aid of this offered magic, one day he would no longer have to see himself forever stained. Uttering a hoarse cry of both want and need, he pressed the pierced silver lid to his mouth and tilted the stone up. The blood of the saints, miraculously restored over and over again throughout the centuries, filled his mouth and ran like sweet summer's wine down his throat. It warmed his innards, flowed through his limbs like fire, bringing the strength and confidence he had lost in his discarnate state.

He crashed to his knees, still feeding frantically, as redness trickled from the corner of his lips. At length Stefan stepped forward and took the Bloodstone from his hands, returning it to its hidden niche in the wall. "Enough!" he said firmly. "You can feed again tomorrow, but it is not wise to drink too much lest you become drunk on what the Bloodstone offers. As did my brother...Radu."

Max retreated to the table and sat in one of the ornately carven chairs. He could sense Michele's dark eyes on him, and knew instinctively that he was radiating his renewed strength and power. "Who is Radu? Does he dwell in Castle Vladislaus as well?"

Stefan gave a bitter laugh. He dwelt here once. "But let us all pray to Mother Night that he comes not here again."

Max raised an inquisitive eyebrow, especially as he caught the sudden added pallor that blanched Michele's cheeks. "You were not on friendly terms with your brother."

Stefan sighed and sat in a chair opposite Max, his back rigid, his eyes tumultuous with memories. Michele came to stand behind him, her pale, slim hands resting lightly on her lover's shoulders. "More than that. Radu and I were mortal enemies."

It was Max's turn to laugh bitterly. "That seems to be the fate of brothers, Stefan, my friend, since Cain and Abel. Certainly it was so with mine. Through his unrelenting pursuit of death and bloodshed, so it was I came to that unhappy pass in which you found me. But...continue with your story."

"Radu was not...as I," Stefan murmured, staring at the tiles. "Not only did he crave mortal lives, he was...misshapen."

At this, Michele visibly shuddered, her face growing even more ghostly.

Stefan continued. "Radu's mother was a sorceress who lived--and may live still, for all I know--in a grove known as the Iron Woods. Using a spell to enhance her beauty, she ensnared my father as he hunted there one moonlit night. Of their union was born Radu--gross in nature and form, his face a gaunt horror, his hands bent into talons..."

"He sounds as if he should be pitied," said Max, his expression fathomless. "A man cannot help the form he is given."

"My father *did* pity him." An edge entered Stefan's voice; his fingers bit into the arms of his chair. "Enough that he had him brought to Castle Vladislaus and reared alongside me, his true-born son from a marriage to a mortal princess, Valenka. And I tried to help Radu, tried to ignore his deformities as best I could and bring out any good in his heart. I failed..." Stefan shook his head. "He hated me from the beginning; childish pranks first played against me turned to more dangerous games. And he hated our father, too, and scorned our code of peace with the villagers. He wanted to take their blood, as in the elder times. Of course, he also wanted the Bloodstone; wanted the strength it would give him, not its freedom from the Curse of Blood. he gorged on it every time my sire allowed it into his hands--so eventually it was locked away from him. Naturally he became enraged, and so he manipulated our father's death. In this very chamber he treacherously took his life."

"What became of Radu?" asked Max.

Stefan rose and gestured to the dark patch of indelible blood marring the flagstones. "We fought with swords; I cut his head from his shoulders. I did not want to slay him, you understand, evil though the was--but he would have killed me...and Michele."

The young woman nodded in agreement. "Yes. He had already brought about the deaths of two of my friends...and was ready to let me share their fate."

"Then it is best he is dead," said Max, his voice low. "I would to all the powers in this unhappy world that I had had the strength to kill Tom likewise. He was ever the thorn in my side. But even at the end, when he destroyed the new life I would have built, I could not slay him outright. I sent him hurtling into otherness, as discarnate as I became myself. I do no know where he--or his spirit--walks now."

The thunder growled outside, shaking the ancient castle walls. Stefan looked uneasy, and rubbed at his arms as if he were cold, which was impossible. "We should speak no more on this subject. Who knows what rides this storm..."

"What could bring fear to a vampire, a drinker of blood?" said Max, with a self-mocking smile.

Stefan did not smile in return; the flashes of the lightning made great hollows appear in his cheeks and round his eyes. "Many things, Max Schreck...or whoever you are," he said, his voice low and hushed.

His demeanour was one of such uneasiness that Max felt compelled to ask," What do you fear?"

Stefan stared out one of the arrow slits, his look vacant. "Radu's body disappeared after our battle. His familiars, the subspecies born of his own deformed flesh, must have carried it away. Remember, Max, Radu is more than vampire. I fear he may be out beyond...biding his time."

The thunder roared again, bellowing like an angry frost-giant. The wind rose in a great gusting shriek that resembled mocking laughter. The stones of the great dark medieval fortress groaned. "Let us linger here no longer," said Michele hurriedly. "I don't like this chamber; it has too many vile memories for me."

Stefan took her hand and together they exited the room with its indelible bloodstain, leaving Max alone to sit and ponder and watch the lightning flash

beyond the impregnable walls until he sought his rest with the coming of the dawn.

*

Twilight descended over Castle Vladislaus. Blue shadows crept on silent feet from the older gatehouse and up through the haphazard graveyard of broken stones. Trees rustled, bending in the wind, leaves turning against the encroaching darkness. Birds fell silent, burying heads beneath wings, hiding from the night, from the brilliant white eye of mother moon.

The moon's eye was hardly a source of worry to one who crept beneath her pocked white face. As pallid as a cadaver, gaunt and grim, his talons scraping at his knees, Radu of Castle Vladislaus crept towards his ancestral home. He grinned as its stark battlements came into view, his lips and gums red from his recent feeding in the village. Yes, she had been sweet indeed...young Sonya...but the revenge he had planned would be sweeter still....

Breath hissing through his snaggled teeth, he continued to lope toward Castle Vladislaus. Even the wind died before him.

*

Max woke slowly as the shadows embraced the stone strong-box in which he lay, far from any destructive light. Instinctively he knew what time it was. His eyelids flickered and he gradually pulled himself upright, muscles taut like those of a cat about to spring. Luxuriously he stretched, tossing back his mane of long hair. And then, in mid-stretch he paused, his eyes suddenly narrowed. Something was outside in the hall; he could sense a presence unfamiliar to him...

He sat in total stillness, pale and perfect as an effigy graven from marble, waiting. And slowly, ever so slowly, the heavy oak door across from him ground open. A weird light flooded into the subterranean crypt with the opening of the door; and a strange figure was silhouetted against its green and venomous shimmer. The figure was tall and emaciated, its breath making rasping noises like the rattle from the lungs of a dying man. But it was the being's hands that attracted Max's immediate attention--for they were not proper hands but bent talons, malformed and over-sized, their bony shadows making gruesome, dancing configurations across the flagstones.

The claws reached out in his direction.... "Radu!" hissed Max leaping from his resting place, the tips of his own fangs glistening, his eyes suddenly black as the pits of the underworld. It had to be Radu...there surely could be none other who fit the demon's description.

The creature laughed harshly, and a grating voice croaked, "I am surprised. My little brother has a guest. He's usually not so sociable...look what he did to me, his own kinsman! But I am more fair than dear Stefan...even though you are his friend, I will let you live. However, I cannot let you free, to try and do me harm or to prevent me from taking my brother and his bitch to their punishment at my dam's abode in the Iron Woods."

Radu thrust himself forward, sinuous as a striking serpent. In one talon he cupped a grisly talisman: a withered hand, severed at the wrist, the middle of the shrunken palm implanted with a candle made of reeking fat. He held it out towards Max, a string of undecipherable words spewing from his slack and dripping mouth.

"The Hand of Glory!" Max recalled with some startlement the gypsy tales of the sleeping magic wrought by the severed hand of a hanged man. And he knew, too, that death-magic was powerful magic, even to one such as himself. It was a magic responsive to his world.

"The Hand was a present from my dear mother," cackled Radu. "She is mighty in magic. Sleep well, stranger, and be glad I do not seek your death. You are unknown to me, but I can sense you are very old and the odour of blood hangs about you: I savour that smell, therefore you shall live, even if you do abide with my foppish brother. But do not try to seek me or rescue Stefan--I shall not show mercy again."

Max snarled and tried to strike the unholy talisman out of Radu's claw, but

the monster retreated, rubbing the shriveled Hand of Glory, repeating the words of the incantation. Max made one more lunge before falling to the floor, inertia gripping his limbs.

Radu leaned over Max, grinning, then abruptly the light that surrounded him faded. Like an ill vapour sucked away by the wind he vanished, leaving Max curled into a fetal crouch on the icy flagstones.

*

The effects of the Hand of Glory did not last long on the ancient vampire. Slowly the lassitude left his limbs and, ablaze with anger, he stalked out of his chamber into the halls of Castle Vladislaus. As he had expected, the castle was empty, its occupants spirited away by the vengeful Radu. In the Great Hall there were signs of a struggle--furniture smashed and broken, a candelabra overturned, a long shred of ripped cloth that had come from Michele's dress. The niche where the Bloodstone had rested gaped open--it was empty of its precious contents. Further down the corridors, the main door hung ajar, half-torn from its hinges, allowing leaves to skitter in across the floor. Max leaned in the doorway and stared balefully across the inner bailey. The moon still hung above, a leprous skull wrapped in night's cowl, lighting a clear path to the trees that over the centuries had encroached upon the grim fortress. "Radu," he murmured under his breath, "you have taken those who aided me, and brought me--a lord of my kind--to my knees, and for this shall you pay--and pay dearly.

He drew himself up to his full height, seeming every bit the king he had once been in his distant past. Over the far-off hills thunder grumbled. On the bleak, wooded slopes around the ruin wolves howled, voices dismal as the ululations of lost souls.

Moments later their plaintive cries were joined by that of another wolf. Silver-pale in the moon-glow, a large beast with shining eyes and bared teeth loped down from the doors of Castle Vladislaus and vanished into the wall of trees.

*

Night was settled over the remote village nestled against the black backdrop of the Iron Woods. Young Karina crept stealthily from her father's cottage and, wrapped in her navy blue shawl, hurried toward the village graveyard. Passing the low stone wall that encircled the hallowed ground, she passed rows and rows of white crosses sticking up like teeth from grassy gums. Some of them had faded pictures or photographs affixed to the front, in memory of the dead that lay below; a line of faded eyes watched Karina as she slunk between the silent rows.

Coming to the end of one of the lines, near the partly dismantled older crypts that nestled alongside the medieval parish church, she suddenly fell to her knees, weak as if all strength had been sucked from her. Tears blurred her eyes, her hands scrabbled at the dirt. "Oh Pieter," she moaned, reading the name on the nearest cross for the thousandth time.

Pieter had been her one hope of escaping the poverty of the tiny village, of moving to the West and freedom. He alone of all the village boys had borne drive and determination, the desire for a better life. They had planned to marry in the spring, and leave...but a farming accident had changed both their lives. The thresher had caught Pieter's arm...no doctor could be summoned in time to halt the bleeding.

Karina knew the villagers would spit on her and make the sign of evil if they saw her amongst the graves this wind-tossed night. They already feared and disliked her because she was different, because she had dreams they thought were foolish, because her mother had been a gypsy woman who came and went, leaving her baby daughter in care of the man she had loved then abandoned. "They would call me a witch or worse," she muttered under her breath. "They are spiteful and stupid--all of them! Yes, they would likely call me a witch and say I was trying to raise Pieter as a vampire...and they would drive stakes through his grave." She spat

onto the ground. "Silly fools. I hate them all..."

She paused, her breath suddenly railing through clenched teeth. Was it a trick of her imagination...or had something moved over by the old church with its ruined wall and frowning dome? Again, she saw it, a figure dark against the blackness. Her heart began to thud against her ribs. "Olga, you old busybody, is that you?" she hissed, referring to one of the most malicious gossips in the village, who liked to spy on everyone and then embroider tales of their doings. "If you're going to make up tales about me, don't bother. I will spread equally vicious ones about you..."

Karina halted, her tongue suddenly knotting on itself. It was not fat, old Olga who approached, gliding as gracefully as a scrap of mist from the crypts near the church. Instead it was a man. A stranger.

Karina was tempted to flee but something stopped her. It was almost as if an invisible hand had descended on her shoulder, holding her in place. She stared at the stranger, speechless, arms dangling uselessly at her sides.

Surely he was either a devil or an angel. No mortal man looked as he did. Her Pieter had been accounted handsome in the village, but his bluff, ruddy peasant good looks paled in comparison to the physical attractiveness of the stranger. His dark hair was long and full, blowing out on the chill wind, surrounding a pale, sculpted face that spoke of aristocratic blood. His eyes were as wide as the paintings on the old churches...and their colour--moonlight on leaves, weird and unnatural. He was tall, dwarfing her by at least half a foot, and he wore what appeared to be a ragged shroud which barely concealed his nakedness.

Despite the fact that Karina had no real faith in God, she crossed herself. Old habit.

He smiled. "Do not fear me, girl," he said softly. "I mean you no harm. I need your help."

"My help." She glanced suspiciously, and folded her arms in a protective/defensive gesture. "I do not think it is *my* help you need, stranger, if it pleases you to run around near naked in a graveyard."

He smiled apologetically. "I need clothing, you are right. That is one thing I hope you will get for me."

"One thing. What else?" He was mad, surely.

"Directions into the Iron Wood."

She shivered, rubbing her arms. "You *are* mad. No one but a madman would walk there."

His dark brows lifted. "Indeed. Did I not hear you spitting on the 'fools' of your village, who believe in such things as witches and vampires?"

"Oh, that." Karina scowled. "I do not say they do not exist. In fact, I am certain they do. It is just that *I* am not a witch, and Pieter was no vampire. And also, not all witches and vampires are the evil demons the churchmen make them."

The dark stranger's eyes glimmered. "You are wiser than you know, Karina. So much wiser. Now...will you help me? Will...will you lead me through the Iron Wood?"

The girl's jaw dropped. Then she regained her composure. "If I were to take you there, what would I gain from it? Nothing is for free, stranger. Nothing."

"I know that well," he replied, eyes suddenly darkening. "But do not fear. I promise, Karina, that you will receive a reward. Your life will be changed...made better. That's all you ever wanted, isn't it?

She tossed windblown strands of her light brown hair back from her face. "How did you know?"

"I know."

She was trembling, but she could no more resist what he offered than she could raise Pieter from his grave. "I will get you some clothes," she whispered, "and then I'll show you to the Iron Woods."

Karina looked Max over critically as he stepped from the ruinous crypt wearing a pair of baggy workman's trousers and a shirt that hung on his slender frame like a sack. "I'm sorry about the fit," she said wryly, "but the clothes were my papa's, and his stomach is big..." She made a bulging gesture with her hands "from drinking too much in the tavern."



Max grinned. "These items far surpass a corpse's shroud."

Karina shuddered. "How could you have taken such a thing and used it?"

The dark man glanced at the dilapidated crypts behind him. "Those who sleep have no need of raiment," he said, with a low laugh.

Karina rubbed absently at their arms. "Why were you naked anyway? I thought you were moonstruck."

"Perhaps I was." A green glow lit the pits of Max's eyes. "Let us just say my clothes got torn to shreds while I was running."

"You frighten me," Karina whispered, bowing her head against the wind. "I don't know what to make of you, what to think. I probably should scream and rouse the men, but I could no more turn you in than stick a knife into my heart or a stake into Pieter's..."

Max reached out and cupped her chin in his hand. "Continue to fear, little girl, but not me. There are darker beings in the Iron Wood, where you and I this night must go."

Karina flinched away from his touch, pulling her threadbare shawl close against the wind. She scraped her hair back into a rough know. "Let's go then. We don't want any of the village folk to notice us."

*

The Iron Wood was dark and silent, possessed of an ancient, eldritch power. The moment they had set foot within its boundaries Max sensed the sorcery of the place, the magic that clung to root and bole. It was a kind of supernatural power he could not fathom.

"Follow me," Karina said in a hushed whisper, guiding him along an overgrown trail that wended its way between dying birches and boulders topped by a mossy fuzz, like green hair on the pates of giants' skulls.

Max followed dutifully, feet making no sound on the leaf-mold. He stared around, amazed. It was as if they had walked into another world, another time. The wind which had been whipping the clouds to a froth in the world beyond was dead here, a mere hissing among the rotted skeletons of leaves. The trees were all old, many dying, barely rooted to the earth that had supported them for so long. Carbuncle-like growths protruded from their bark, and sap welled from suppurations in their trunks. The very air reeked of age--of death and decay. This was not a living forest as he remembered forests, but rather a sanctuary of death.

"Have you ever been here before?" he asked Karina, unbelieving that any mere mortal would walk in such a place willingly.

Karina nodded. "As a child I came here...I always sought to disobey papa, for he tormented me with my mother's past. I have been...quite far into the forest. Children believe they are immortal, you know. "She walked on a few more paces, passing a lichen-encrusted boulder that may have once been a milestone. "But you haven't told me what it is *you* want here..."

"I seek..." he took a breath, "for friends. Friends who are lost. An evil man. His mother. A sacred talisman."

Karina let out a peel of laughter that was stifled by the close air of the forest. "You *are* moonstruck, my friend. What you speak of sounds like a child's faerytale."

Max's expression was unreadable. "I thought you, Karina, would be wiser than to decry old tales. There is much truth in them. But tell me, in your childhood peregrinations into the wood, what did you find?"

She licked her lips. "Most of the time...nothing. Weird black squirrels...deformed slugs and crawling insects. But once..." She hesitated, chewing her lip.

"Yes?"

"Once I heard a voice calling me. A foul, evil voice. And I glimpsed a lighted path, and a house...a house of terror. I fled home and fell into bed; later I told papa, but he said I was only dreaming."

"It was no dream," Max murmured under his breath.

Karina stopped, staring at him. "You seek the witch, don't you? she asked in

an awed tone. "The sorceress of the Iron Wood. The one we name Avestitza--the Wing of Satan."

Max made no reply but continued to trudge into the unwholesome foliage of the Iron Woods.

*

After an indefinite time a subtle change came over the primeval forest. Black shadows lightened to grey: the trollish faces born of knotted bark took on a pinkish hue. Max glanced uncomfortably up at the sky--dawn was fast approaching, though no bird sang in the Iron Wood to herald its arrival. He had to find a place safe from whatever rays could penetrate the leafy canopy of the trees. Turning to Karina, he clutched her arm in a hard grip, making her jump. "Karina, do you know of any place where we may rest away from the sunlight?"

She frowned, a little puzzled by this sudden request. "I believe there's an old ruin nearby. It's center is hollow; I've heard rumored it is haunted, an old gravesite. Surely, it is better to stay in the open..."

"Take me there!" His voice crackled with authority, as his fingertips bit into her arm.

Reluctantly Karina led Max away from the trail and into a deeper area of the forest. Out of the lush soil rose a large hummock, obviously artificial by its rondure and size. A stone stuck out of the summit like a bony finger; as they drew close, Max could vaguely discern a graven image on its surface--a naked warrior armed with axe and sword, his face contorted in a fierce grimace. Hurrying up to the stone he placed his hand upon it, and his mind was suddenly flooded with visions--Scythian warriors sweeping down from the steppes on their shaggy horses, a lordling dying while embroiled in battle with a monstrous hag, his men raising his *kurgan* or barrow over his remains...and over the impaled corpses of the young horsemen who had decided to join their master in the glorious otherworld. He gasped, almost able to smell the blood that steamed in the weak autumn sun, and realized with a start he needed to feed again. He felt weak...

Beside him, Karina was prying at a clod of earth and stone. It burst up, revealing a narrow passage into the heart of the tumulus. Casting a wary glance at the heavens, Max slid into the dark womb of mother earth. Karina followed reluctantly.

Their feet hit against a dirt floor marked with the sign of old fires, and covered with bits of debris. Obviously travelers had used this hollow hillock as a resting place before. Max paced the floor, glad to be out of the harmful light, but still uneasy. Something about this place wasn't as it seemed.... He stalked around the narrow space, stamping on the ground, while Karina stared in consternation. "What are you doing, Max? If this is an ancient grave as they say, better to leave it undisturbed."

"I must find out..." Suddenly, with a roar, the floor beneath Max's heel gave way. Karina shrieked as both of them plummeted into an ante-chamber hidden for centuries by the false floor.

They were in a burial chamber of great stones. On what had in its day been a rich bed of furs lay a warrior's skeleton. Chips of golden finery glittered in the putrid muck that had once been a bearskin coverlet, and beside them lay a long sword carved with runes.

"Ugh! gasped Karina, scrambling away from the grinning skeleton.

Max approached with interest, picking up the sword. "I think I shall keep this," he said, slipping it through his belt.

Karina's brow furrowed in disgust and more than a little fear. "You mustn't steal from the dead."

"*He* will not need it," Max gestured to the dead chieftain. "Those who die and stay dead cannot use a sword, but I may." A bout of weariness flooded over him and he sank down next to the Scythian's bones. "Now let me rest...."

"You are insane This is...unnatural!" she cried, shaking her head wildly. "Tell me what this is all about...I want truths from you!"

"I promised to help you escape your miserable life--is that not enough?"

"Escape my life? Do you **really** mean by murdering me when you've done whatever it is you mean to do, chasing fabled witches..."

"You believe in witches, Karina, you said so yourself. And vampires." His eyes darkened, as he felt a rush of need. *You bastard!* he inwardly chastised himself, as he realized for the first time the true reason why he had mentally coerced the girl to assist him in his quest. She was there to be used, since there was no alternate source of blood...and what would he give her at the end? Groaning, he buried his head in his hands, fighting the natural urges of his kind.

Karina's breath came out a windy gasp as she too realized for the first time what this daylight-hating being must be. "You are...one of them," she choked.

He looked at her, eyes cavernous, bearing a deadly dark beauty. His voice deepened, coarsened, losing its cultured cadences. "I am. Go now, if you wish. I have played you false. I said I would not harm you. But I will take from you if you stay."

She stood stock-still, gaze fastened on him. She looked like a frightened rabbit, wanting to flee but unable, caught within the hypnotic glare of the snake. Watching her, Max felt the need for blood subside to a dull ache. He could not. Would not. Leave her be...it was time to rest, to recuperate as best he could before facing the witch Karina had called the Wing of Satan.

He turned on his side away from the girl with her rapidly beating heart, her surging blood, which called him like a signal. He forced his eyes shut, and fell rapidly into the darkened pit that was his sleep by day.

*

When Max woke on his bed of gold and slime, he expected he would be alone. Instead, to his surprise, he saw Karina huddled against the wall, a slim white shape in the gloom. "You are still here!" he said, in amazement.

She nodded. "Where could I go? Back home? The village is death anyway. Living death of a different sort." She laughed bitterly.

"You stay, knowing what I wanted to do to you?"

"You said you wouldn't kill me." Her voice trembled slightly.

His own voice softened. "And I meant it. But I wanted to use you to take your blood to make me strong... I *need* blood, Karina; for a while I found means to avoid taking from humans, but in this forsaken place..."

"I understand," she said simply.

"You should be terrified."

"I would be a liar if I said I wasn't," she said, swallowing. "But my mother was a gypsy and some say a witch, and she did not fear the worlds of the unseen. Maybe it is my only way to step beyond..."

He felt the need resurface again; his limbs trembled. "You offer willingly..."

She nodded; a bead of sweat ran down her cheek. "I always wanted to be different...make me what you are, Max Schreck."

"I do not wish to make you. Only to take. The Curse of Blood is exactly that...a curse. You may see immortality, but our curse is another kind of death." He shook his head violently.

"In my immortality could I not seek for betterment, even as you?" She suddenly reached out and caught the front of his shirt. "I know you are not evil, no matter what the legends say of your kind. Your eyes would have told me if you were truly evil."

"You're a fool!" He caught her wrists, trying to avoid looking at the long, white expanse of her throat, the pulsing vein that taunted him with its nearness. He could almost scent her blood. "Stupid child, I killed thousands in Wallachia and Rumania; they named me Devil's son..."

"It is past!" she said. "Take what I offer; give me your 'curse' as my 'payment'!" She pushed back her golden brown hair from her neck. "Listen, Max, tell me, tell me everything, what made you, what drove you. I want to know everything; I always did, and my papa beat me for it. That's why I wanted to go to the West--to learn, to experience. But now I can have knowledge that few others

have."

"You have called me 'mad' many times since our meeting," he said, reaching out towards her. "But I think it is you who are crazed, Karina." He struggled with himself, looking into her wide grey eyes. *But she offers willingly; she need not be hurt...*

Karina threw her arms up round his neck. "Who are you really? Tell me...let me know the secrets. I want to hear them."

"My name," he said huskily, "is Vlad. So was my father called, a lord who was awarded lands by Sigismund for slaying the Turks.

She froze, her hands caught in his dark hair. "That...that means...surely you cannot be he who is not forgotten?"

"Oh, yes." He raised her head and kissed her, letting the tips of his barely concealed fangs scrape against her lips. "The name they gave me was Dracula, son of the Dragon...or the Devil."

"You killed all those people so cruelly...why?"

He pulled her closer, molding his body to hers. His eyes were fully darkened again, the irises chips of jet. His mouth moved against her ear. "Rage. Anger. For what was done to me."

"What was done to you?" She sank deeper into his embrace, her question gasped between his increasingly passionate kisses. She did not flinch as he tore her white blouse away from her shoulders.

"Have you heard of Jeanne d'Arc--the warrior maid they called La Pucelle? In her ranks was one of vampire kind, but malign and twisted. His name was Gilles de Laval, and he murdered 140 children to feed both blood lusts--and other lusts. When his mistress died he fled; men thought him dead. But he had in truth sought sanctuary with the Turks. Then came a time when, as a youth, I was their prisoner...and his." Max drew back for an instant, his voice heavy with hatred. "He made me what I am, tortured me with all the perversions he knew. After my escape I wanted to make every being on the earth suffer as I had suffered."

"And now?" She stared into those black, soulless eyes.

"I shun killing. I want to reform the vampire so that we may live alongside men. That is why what you want me to do you...seems abhorrent."

"I don't think it will be so dreadful," she said hoarsely, for the first time returning his kiss with ardor, her hand reaching for his belt.

He pushed her down onto the floor of the chamber, kneeling over her, fingers dancing over her white flesh. For a moment he thought, with regret, of Nina, his mortal lover, of her body molded to his in a sharing that did not need blood.... But she had rejected him in the end, her courage flagging, dooming him and perhaps even his son, Tyler... At least with Karina there was no such rejection.

Fumbling, Karina reached out to draw him closer to her, over her parted thighs. He leaned over her neck, his fangs extended, ready to draw what he needed from the vein that pulsed so invitingly close to the surface. Karina moaned and wrapped her legs around his. "Do what you must..." she murmured faintly.

He bit into her neck at the same moment he thrust into her, savoring both the feel of her body and the sweetness of her blood as it gave him new life, new strength. He scarcely heard her cry, did not know whether it was a sound of pleasure or pain...or both.

He fed for a short while longer, taking his pleasure of her at the same time. But eventually, when he was sated in all ways, he realized he had to stop feeding, or he would drain her. He pulled his reddened mouth from her throat and disentangled his limbs from hers, while reaching for his discarded clothes.

She stared at him dazedly from the floor. Her neck was bruised, bloody. She put a shaking hand to the wounds. "You will...make me one of you?" she whispered hoarsely. "You won't leave it like this? I am changed, I can tell...but in the twilight, not the night itself!"

He kissed her forehead and assisted her to dress. "No, I won't leave you like this. You have my word. But I cannot do more tonight."

She staggered to her feet, arms locked around him in a hard embrace. No sooner had she done so than a sudden rush, as of displaced air, sounded overhead. The trees in the Iron Wood were creaking frantically, as if their boughs were

about to snap.

Max stared up to the hidden entrance of the Scythian tomb. Karina's eyes widened. "I know that sound! It is Avestitza, Wing of Satan, whirling by!"

Max smiled grimly, his fingers playing on the hilt of his acquired sword. "Let us go and pay her a visit."

*

The forest beyond was dark, save for the glow of fireflies and strange clumps of phosphorescent mold that grew on the trees. Karina slipped through the tangle of foliage, Max close on her heels, his motion as silent and graceful as the night-hunting wolf. After a while they stumbled on what remained of a roadway that had once wended its way through the Iron Wood. The cracked flagstones of the path glowed faintly, as if the ancient stones somehow embodied the dying moonlight. Together Max and Karina followed the winding track.

Abruptly the trail led down into a valley where the trees clustered even thicker: stunted pine and dead birches falling one on the other like mourners at a burial. An air of sadness, desolation--and evil--clung to the place.

Karina's breath hissed through her teeth. "Look, Max!" She pointed ahead with a trembling hand.

There, on the side of the trail, was a human skull on a whittled pole. A grisly enough ornament at best...but this skull was unusual in that a pale, poisonous light flowed from the eye sockets and gaping jaw.

"The witch's work," said Max, striking the grotesque object from its precarious perch. The skull rolled into the underbrush, its light failing.

Karina took another step forward and gave a little shriek. "There are more of them!" She gestured to a line of glowing death's heads that ran away into the twisted trees.

"I think we are expected," said Max, his lips curving in a grim little smile. "Avestitza is lighting her lanterns for our arrival."

They continued on, proceeding down the line of ensorcelled skulls. At length they reached the bottom of the valley. Before them, surrounded by black willows, their boles ready to dissolve to fetid water at a touch, reposed a cottage.

Both Max and Karina gaped in startlement. Even Max, in all his long years of existence, had never seen such a dwelling. It was low and quaint in shape and form--and appeared to be built entirely of delicious foodstuffs. The roof was slabs of confectionery, as were the moldings and the lacy trim around the windows. the walls were brown--could they be gingerbread? *Like the gingerbread house in children's stories,* he mused. *So they are more than fictions--as are those who are Children of the Night! She probably does eat children when she's fattened them, too...*

Leaving Karina, who stood transfixed, he strode up to the door. He tried the handle--it was locked. From there, he worked his way round tot he window. Beyond the filmy panes he could see a roaring fire, too red and intense to be natural, and hanging above it, in an iron cage, Stefan of Castle Vladislaus. The vampire clutched the bars, his face a picture of drained misery. By the hollowness of eyes and cheeks he had not fed for far too long. Anger boiled up in Max. "Stefan!" he shouted, and he brought his hands smashing down against the window.

As glass showered, Stefan glanced up. "Do not try to rescue us!" he implored, his voice thick and slurred. "The witch is too powerful, and she has allies! Radu, and another..."

Max snarled in anger, his eyes growing thundercloud black. "I do not fear Avestitza. She may be my elder and a sorceress, but my legacy of fear is no less than hers." He reached into the house, to tear down a fragment of the walls...and then he heard Karina scream in absolute terror.

He whirled just in time to see her struggling in the talons of Radu. the demonic vampire chuckled and slavered, dripping trails of bloody saliva down the front of her blouse. His curved fingernails toyed with the buttons. "How sweet is she?" he hissed. "I see your marks are on her already." The monster fingered her bruised neck. "Shall I finish the job?" He bared his fangs.

"No!" shouted Max, stepping forward, his voice deepened to a growl. *"She is mine!"*

Radu's hideous countenance contorted even further, and he spat at Max's feet. "Nothing's yours in this place!" he snapped. "It is the abode of my dam, and she rules the Iron Woods!" So saying, he retreated suddenly, his form wavering like an unholy flame. Seconds later he was gone, carrying Karina with him. High-pitched, malicious laughter reverberated through the forest.

Max snarled in frustration, not knowing which way to turn. At last he went to Stefan, hanging like some animal waiting for slaughter in Avestitza's cage. As Max fumbled with the lock, Stefan pushed his hands away. "No, don't bother with me!" he said with all the firmness and authority he could muster in his weakened state. "Get your companion back; she can be killed easier than I! And...the witch and Radu have Michele; I don't know what they are planning to do with her." Reaching through the bars a little farther, he clutched Max's sleeve. "What happens to me is of no consequence, but Michele..."

Max nodded. "I will do what I can." He turned and hurried from the pretty cottage with its dark secrets.

This time, as he continued through the valley, the skull lanterns went out one by one as he passed. The woods were cloaked in utter darkness--which meant little to the vampire, whose eyes were adjusted to the night.

Eventually he heard the slow drip of water as it splashed into a greater pool. Pushing aside a hanging clump of interwoven vines and creepers, he stepped into a macabre garden.

Willows and yew, sacred to the moon and death, clustered about a black pool centered by a fountain that spat a trail of slow, congealed ichor. Carefully he stepped towards the pool, crushing the deadly nightshade that grew in abundance in the grass.

"Help me!" The words came faintly to his ears at first, as if from a great distance. He paused, frowning.

"Karina?" he muttered. "Is it you? Where has he taken you?"

Max strode to the water's edge and peered in. Below the surface of the pond he could see a figure...a woman, but not Karina. Her hair was raven-black and flowed out around a chiseled, lovely face. She stretched long, sinuous arms toward him. "Help me. Free me!"

"Who are you?" he asked. "Did the witch and her son bind you here?"

"My name is Mara," she said. "Help me!" She glanced up imploringly. "Avestitza put me here."

Slowly, drawn by her pallid loveliness, he reached into the waters. The woman, although beautiful, was of no concern to him, and yet he felt compelled--perhaps his training as a doctor had created in him the need to assist others. He did not know. Nonetheless, he found himself clasping the woman's cold, white hand...

Unexpectedly, water rushed up, sluicing into his eyes, blinding him. He fell back, fangs bared in sudden defensiveness. When his vision cleared, the woman was twirling before him, dark and luminous, a black moon. Her feet hovered above the grass. She was fanged like a vampire, yet he instinctively knew she was more than that. "Have you forgotten, my pretty friend from afar," she sneered, "that Mara is but a name of the Night-Hag--of Mother Death? Of Avestitza, who is Wing of Satan? Or did a pretty face and comely body make you forget?"

"Free my friends," he said, ignoring her taunts. "Whatever ill-will lies between Stefan and Radu must be worked out by them; Michele and Karina are of no consequence in these matters!"

"Oh noble, pure son of the night!" laughed Avestitza, and she spat on his cheek. Her spittle stung like snake venom. "How the centuries have changed you. I can feel the power that was in you once, can smell the blood that stained your fangs."

"Those days are over. I no longer kill," he told her fiercely.

The sorceress sighed. "Yes, and a pity it is. Such a shame to see one so mighty...fallen. I might have liked you as a lover, once--your face is not too hard to gaze upon."

"I dare say yours is not so attractive as the mask you ar wearing," he shot back. "Not if you are, indeed, the dam of that misbegotten creature, Radu!"

Avestitza hissed in rage, and her face melted like tallow, dripping away to reveal the truth that Max had suspected. The witch was old, her skin corpse-grey, her lips black and gnarled back from her long teeth. "See me as I am, then!" she hissed. "Does it please you more? I could make you bed me, you know--this is my wood and I am a Queen here! But I've had my fill of men...weddings and beddings are for the young." She gave a demonic cackle. "There hasn't been any such goings on here for years--but that's all about to change!"

Max made a lunge at her, missing by inches as Avestitza levitated into the air. "What do you mean?"

Avestitza waved her claw and a haunting refrain--an eerie waltz, the suitable melody for a danse macabre--wafted into the clearing. Out of the trees capered a leering Radu, guiding Michele by the hand. The young woman's eyes were glazed and blank, as if she were blind. She wore a ragged white shift that was a cruel mockery of a bridal gown, and her dark hair was topped by a wilting garland of nightshade. Radu cast Max a sidelong look, and fawned upon his intended "bride", slavering over her face with his withered, corpse-like lips. Red saliva dripped down Michele's chin. She did not flinch, remaining immobile as a doll of wax.

"This is an abomination!" Max hissed, his eyes glowing.

"Oh, there's more, my pretty!" cackled Avestitza, rubbing her talons together. "Such merriment in the Iron Woods!"

Another pair of figures emerged from the ebon fastness of the trees. One was Karina, dressed in the same fashion as Michele, her eyes glazed with the same enchanted blankness. Clutching her arm was a cowled figure. Low chuckles escaped the hood.

"Release her!" Max cried, stepping forward. "She has no part in this--she is still human!"

"Take off your hood, my new, dear friend," chuckled Avestitza, gesturing to the newcomer in the monkish robes. "Show our visitor here what a fitting groom we've found for his charming little toy."

A curlique of smoke blew out of the black hood; moments later, the folds of cloth were tossed back to reveal a pale, grinning face decked in dark glasses. "Hi there, Maxie!" Tom sneered, blowing another ring of smoke in Max's direction. "Fancy meeting you here! You keep turning up like the proverbial bad penny."

"Tom!" Max stood rooted to the spot in surprise, his hands clenching and unclenching uselessly. During their last battle for supremacy he had sent his twisted kinsman whirling through a vortex back into time in the hope that they would never again meet on this plane of existence. What evil fortune that they should be brought together under such circumstances...

"Yup, it's me...your loving brudder," smirked Tom, removing his glasses and staring with malevolence at Max. He then turned his attention to Karina. "Well, I have one thing to say, Maxie baby, you have got good taste in women. But really..." He caressed the twin bite marks on Karina's neck. "You really gotta stop wanting to make 'em into us. You're too susceptible, my man, too easily taken in by a pretty face..." He shook Karina, reveling in the way her head flopped loosely, like that of a ragdoll. "Most of these human bitches are a good fuck and a good feed, that's all! I'm sure this one will do me on both counts!"

Max snarled and lunged forward, his apathy vanished. "You have taken and ruined what I want far too many times. I will end this insanity forever!"

Radu loped into the space between Max and Tom, shaking a long, admonishing finger in Max's face. "Oh, no, we mustn't have any more of this sibling rivalry!" he chortled. "We mustn't have our merry little celebration ruined...." He gave a low whistle, and out of the shrubbery weird, deformed shapes began crawling, like figures out of children's nightmares. Goblinish and stunted, their skin was the colour and consistency of a lizard's and their eyes were bright as the headlights on a train. "My subspecies!" Radu shrieked mirthfully as the creatures, with an agility and strength their size belied, leaped upon Max pawing and groping with splayed fingers.

The tall vampire fought wildly, his complete change coming upon him. Several

dwarfish bodies hurtled through the air to splatter against the trunks of trees. But for every subspecies that fell, was killed or maimed, another appeared to take its place. They swarmed like ants over Max Schreck, driving him to his knees on the ground. Gasping, he flailing at the subspecies, feeling much as Gulliver must have when first set upon by the Lilliputians--but these were far more sinister than the tiny folk of Swift's story.

"Now," Avestitza shrilled, "we can continue with our joyful little celebration uninterrupted!"

Tom whirled Karina to face him; his fangs were fully extended. "C'mon baby, let's rock n' roll!" he howled dementedly. At the same time, Radu tossed Michele onto the moss and began ripping at her wedding-shroud with savage lust.

"I'll show that foppish fool Stefan who is the true master of Castle Vladislaus and all it contains!" he rasped, straddling the unresisting girl.

Max beat at the subspecies with renewed fury, crushing a head here, a limb there. The creatures squealed and bit at him, but refused to be dislodged, clinging to his flesh like obscene leeches. Suddenly he felt a warm sensation against his left hip. Glancing down in puzzlement, he noticed that the hilt of the sword he had taken from the Scythian barrow was glowing. His brows contracted in puzzlement. He had thought about using the sword before, but only half in jest; he did not really believe any weapon made by mortal man, especially primitive man, would avail him more than his strength as a vampire. Yet now, it seemed anything was worth a try...

Reaching for the sword, he wrapped his fingers around the hilt. The subspecies went wild, shrieking and snapping at his fingers. Ignoring them, he drew the ancient weapon in a flash of light.

The subspecies wailed even louder and loosened their hold on his limbs. Eyes gleaming, Max swung at them with the blade, shearing heads from torsos and arms from shoulders. The demonic beings panicked and started to flee towards the undergrowth. Max pursued them relentlessly, slashing and striking with the Scythian sword. Bodies tumbled, smoking and melting; evidently the iron in the weapon worked as a poison on the demonic creatures.

"No!" shrieked Radu, springing away from Michele's inert body... "My creations, born of my own flesh!" He took a wild run at Max, seeking to wrest the sword from his grip.

Max kicked him away with savage anger, leveling the Scythian weapon at his adversary's neck. Avestitza loosed a bloodcurdling shriek, and drew from within her robes a black blade to match the one Max held. She hurled it at her son. "He will not best you now!" she cried. "Fight him, Radu! Cut off his head and give it me as a trophy!"

Max's lips curled into an altogether unpleasant smile as he looked from mother to son--and then to Tom, who had let Karina drop like a piece of chaff to the ground and was watching in bored amusement. "I think you're sorely mistaken, witch," he said to Avestitza. "Hasn't dear Tomas told you? Did he never tell you who I am--was? If not, let me enlighten you; my true name is *Vlad Tepish*." His voice deepened with menace. "Yes, I am the Son of the Dragon--Dracula. A prince of Wallachia who lived by the *sword*."

"I am not afraid of you!" hissed Radu, though there was urgency and a trace of unease in his feral eyes. "I, too, have had training with weapons!" He flourished his own sword. "That fool Stefan and the wretch who fathered me trained themselves."

Max closed in to strike his blade against Radu's with a steely clangor. "You've learned a bit of swordplay," he said icily, "but did you ever send a whole army of Turks fleeing from your prowess? Did you ever dye your arms red to the elbows in the heat of battle? *I have*, my friend, and I'll likewise bathe in whatever poison courses through your veins!"

Radu spat contemptuously at Max and thrust at his midriff with his sword. Max parried deftly, his gestures graceful and faintly mocking, as if he were toying with an unskilled child. Avestitza scurried towards her son, her mouth working frantically, her whole attitude suddenly changed. A blue vein pulsed in her temple. "A measure of Sight has come to me, and I have seen your doom on the blade

of this man. Yes, I dreamed last night you were devoured by a Dragon--you heard who he is: Dracula, son of the Dragon!"

"Unhand me, crone!" shrieked Radu, trying to prise her off his arm so that he could swing at Max. "Your wailing and whining deflects my aim!"

"I agree!" said Max, with dark mirth. "I say we should silence the Wing of Satan, don't you?" He whirled on his heel, wielding the Scythian sword two-handed. The blade whistled as it clove the muggy forest air, then fell abruptly silent as it bit into undead flesh and then bone. Mouth frozen in a silent scream, Avestitza's head rolled across the green lawn and came to rest under a shrub. Her body remained upright for a moment, arms outflung in a helpless gesture, then collapsed in a bony and pathetic heap at Radu's feet.

The monstrous creature flung back his head and howled in grief, saliva spattering his chin and his clothes. At the same moment, both Michele and Karina sprang into motion, freed of the witch's binding spell. Karina ran towards Max, but he warded her away and stalked toward his brother Tom, who was lounging against a tree, twiddling the butt of his cigar between forefinger and thumb. Tom looked unconcerned. "Isn't that weapon a little crude for you, big brudder?" he said. "Thought you went for fancy magic?"

"Shut up, you bastard!" hissed Max, adjusting his grip on the sword and positioning it for a swing.

Tom looked the picture of hurt innocence, his lips sucked up in a pout. "Aw, c'mon, Maxie, you wouldn't want to do that..."

"Oh, wouldn't I?"

"No!" Tom's voice abruptly deepened to a malevolent growl. "Not if you value this fuckin' bauble..." he reached into the pocket of his jacket and yanked out the Bloodstone. He tossed it up and down like a child's ball. "What a pity it would be if this got smashed, eh, Maxie? It was perfect to perfect your little plans about changing us mean ol' vampires. Actually, I've tried it and it *is* rather tasty...though not as tasty as human blood when the adrenaline's pumpin' and the heart's failin'... But you'd like it, wouldn't you, Maxie baby--'cause out here in the Rumanian boonies it's the only way you can avoid killing..."

Max stared at this brother with pure hatred. "Why don't you just smash it? It means nothing to you; why do you play with me like a petulant child?"

Tom grinned. "I don't want this little piece of cosmic cubic zirconia, that's true," he said, "but I thought, knowing you, we might be able to work out a little deal. My terms...for the Bloodstone. Otherwise, crash-bang-boom--all gone!" He tossed the stone again, nearly dropping it as he caught it.

"You bastard!" Max repeated.

"Just like my brother," smirked Tom, taking a stride in Max's direction, the Bloodstone glittering on his outstretched palm. "Now--about my terms..."

"There can be no terms for the likes of you!" A new voice suddenly echoed through the trees. Snarling, Tom whirled about--to face Stefan of Castle Vladislaus, holding a drawn bow in his hand. His features were gaunt and drawn, but his eyes were full of purpose.

"That stone belongs to my family," Stefan said coldly.

"Not anymore, buddy," snapped Tom. "And watch where you're aiming that toothpick."

"That 'toothpick' as you put it, is good stout oak, my friend, " said Stefan, eyes smoldering. "Good enough to put an end to you."

Tom growled and made a lunge for Stefan...but before he had taken more than a few steps, Stefan let the arrow fly. It bored deep into Tom's chest, the filed tip protruding from his back. Howling, he teetered in a circle, while his skin withered and peeled, and smoke gushed from his eye sockets. Karina gave a cry of horror and sank down on the grass, hiding her eyes from the grisly sight, while Max stared impassively.

"I'll...get...you...for...this..." Tom's failing voice grated out of blackened, half-skeletal jaws as he tumbled to his knees at Max's feet.

"I think not," said Max with icy finality, turning his back on the writhing grotesquery.

Tom roared in agony and, in one last convulsion, hurled the Bloodstone at his

brother seconds before his bones came apart and crumbled to heaps of reeking ash.

"By Mother Moon, the Stone!" Stefan cried in alarm. "It will fall and be shattered...we will be damned! Even now I fade for want of its sustenance!"

From her place near the cowering Karina, Michele sprang into motion. Agile as a wildcat, she leaped into the air, catching the Bloodstone as it arced toward the ground.

Landing safely on her feet, she held the sacred talisman aloft in triumph, all its facets glittering. "How did you do that?" asked Stefan, in amazement, as he took it from her fingers and began to feed.

She smiled. "Simple. I used to be on the high school basketball team back in America!"

Max turned to look at her, wild laughter fulminating inside him. Basketball! By the Gods of Darkness, how the vampire had changed since the fifteenth century!

Stefan, noticing Max's odd expression, placed a hand on his arm. "I think it is high time we all headed back to the castle," he said. "We must all partake of the nourishment the Bloodstone gives. And another dawn will be coming soon."

*

Night descended on Castle Vladislaus. The moon slashed at the turrets; bats sailed in and out of lairs in the pitted stonework. On the wall-walks, bathed in the moonlight, four figures strode, unseen by any but the night-roving bats.

"We owe you our lives," Stefan said to Max. "You saved us from Radu and his dam. You did not have to; you could easily have left us to our fates."

"I have much evil to atone for," said Max seriously. "I could not have added your deaths to that list."

Michele reached out and touched his elbow. "Max, I want to give you a gift. We know now what you want for our people, and we agree. Take the Bloodstone." She pressed the conical container into his hand folding his unwilling fingers around its cool surfaces.

Eyes wide, he stared at her and then at Stefan. "But you...you and Stefan will have to revert to the kill if I take the relic!"

Michele took a deep breath and glanced in her lover's direction. "Stefan, shall I tell him? Or do you want to?"

"I will tell him." Stefan ceased to walk and stood directly in front of the taller vampire. "Max, we have grown tired of living in this fortress of stone. We have become anachronisms. We do not belong in this time, this place, any longer."

"What are you saying?" Max frowned, folding his arms across his chest.

Swallowing, Michele faced Max. "What we're saying is...Max, I have family...a mother...still in America. I once told you I was from no country, but I lied. I still love my family and my old home, no matter what I've become. Max, we want to go with you...to America."

"What makes you think I am returning there?" Max asked, looking slightly perturbed.

"You had a life there...you told us you were a doctor," said Stefan.

"Did I?" Max mused, fiddling absently with a tear in the cuff of his shirt...

"Yes," said Michele," when you first came to us, in your delirium..."

"What of me?" Karina suddenly blurted out. She gestured to herself. "You promised me... Will you leave me a halfling?" With a half-rueful gesture, she rubbed her bruised throat.

Max peered at her for a few moments, emotions running over his face like clouds across the face of the moon. She had accepted what Nina had refused, and already he was treating her with his accustomed selfishness, the inborn arrogance of one who was once a feudal lord. It was time for the old ways to die... "Of course I won't leave you half-turned," he said gently, putting his arm about her waist and drawing her close to him. The moonglow silvered her honey-brown hair, dimmed her eyes. "I promised you a better life, didn't I? ...Stefan, Michele, at sundown tomorrow we shall make for the west. The journey will not be an easy one, but I have made it before. We will go to America."

"To help our people there--and ourselves," breathed Michele.

"My Pieter always promised we would go to America," said Karina, laughing a little against Max's shoulder. "After he died I never really thought I would get there."

"We must get ready for our journey," said Stefan solemnly, gesturing to the castle door. "As you said, Max, it will not be an easy one."

"Yes," Max nodded, turning Karina to face him, running his thumbs over her fine, pale cheek, "and Karina and I have a little...business to complete."

The four entered the castle as the moon hid its face in a cloud.

*

The next night castle Vladislaus lay empty. A new desolation hung over it. The turrets sagged, and stones tumbled from the walls, clattering in the silence. Peasants passing by on their way to a funeral in a neighboring village crossed themselves as they noticed the clouds of bats sailing away from the castle. "It's as if the Old Ones, the Vampyr, are dead," said one old woman in a hushed voice. "Dead...or have left for good."

Her companion, a grey-headed man, shuddered. "Do not speak of them; it brings evil to do so! Ah, and it is a wicked night, Varvara! Can you not hear the wolves howling in the hills?"

The old woman listened, head cocked to one side. "I can indeed. But there's no need to worry, they're getting farther away with every moment. Heading West..."

Heading West... Toward the sea... Toward a new home...

- The End -

[Janet P. Reedman has been writing fantasy since she was 11 years old and discovered Tolkien. Since then, she has garnered publication credits in several hundred small press/semi-pro fantasy/horror magazines. She was nominated for a Pushcart Prize for poetry in '86, and has won several writing awards. In '84 she stumbled onto ROBIN OF SHERWOOD, and from there found her way into the wacky world of fanfic and fanzines. She currently edits a ROS fanzine, LEGEND. Besides writing, she also sings (sort of) and acts, and travels a lot (mainly to the U.K.). This is her first vampire story.]



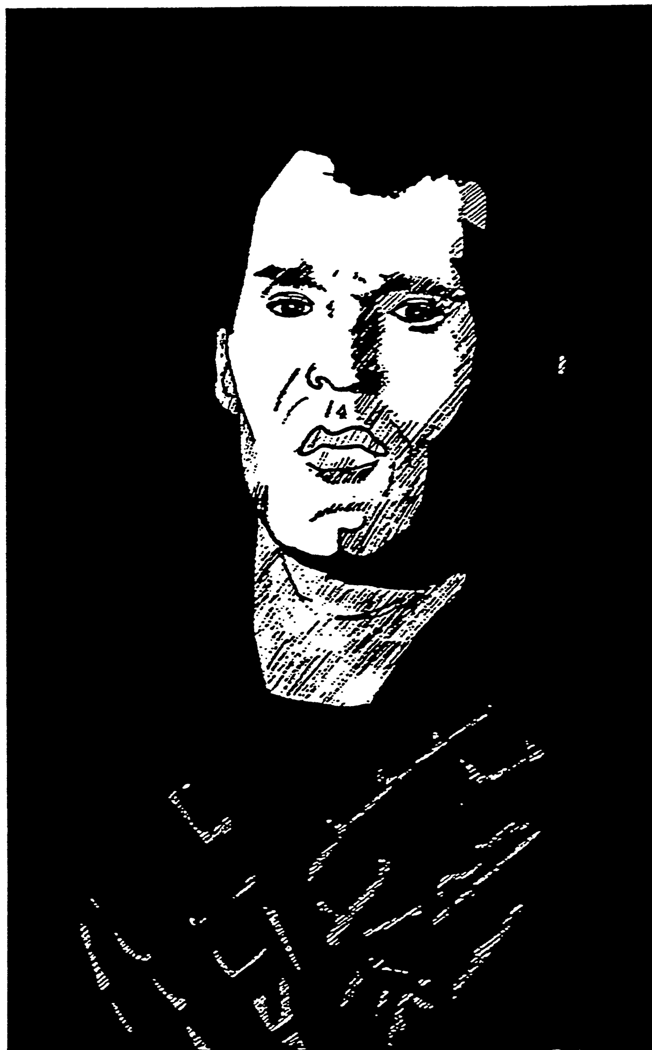
NINA REMEMBERS MAX SCHRECK

I remember him, that first night
under glaring hospital lights,
the smell of antiseptic gripping
my nostrils, my child sick and strange,
my life turned upside down.
In his pristine garb he seemed
an angel born of light, his eyes
glimmering with more than mortal fire;
they brought me peace and calm.

I remember him, that storm-tossed night
when we rode from his gothic mansion
towered and old, the wind whipping his long hair
back across my face, the lightning cracking
like the whip of a vengeful god around us.
And then, back within the mansion's walls,
within his arms, I knew his passion,
and the crackle of the lightning,
the rumble of the thunder,
was only wild and welcome music to accompany
the ancient dance of love.

I remember him, that final time,
changed in the fury of what he was,
battling the evil of his own flesh and blood
in a room changed from splendor
to hideous wreckage and filth,
while the sun spilled through long windows
destroying with purifying rays,
taking him away, while I wept in confused grief,
for he called to me
as the sunbeams did their deadly dance,
and I, chained by my frailty, my human fears,
was too afraid to answer.

Janet P. Reedman



Derrin '92

ANGEL OF DARKNESS, ANGEL OF LIGHT

by

Diana Smith, Pat Dunn, and Valerie Meachum

"Mrs. Stoddard, I am so delighted you could come this evening," Varina Thanos-Tannek said, extending her hand to Elizabeth Collins Stoddard. "My husband and I were afraid no one would come to our open house. We had been warned that outsiders aren't always made welcome in Maine, but I can see we were misled."

Elizabeth looked at the small elegant woman before her, and took her hand in a firm shake. "Perhaps that was so in the old days, Mrs. Tannek, but this is the 1990s. We're not the isolationists that we once were."

"Forgive me if I have insulted you," Varina said, a frown marring the exquisite features. "We are grateful that Collinsport has accepted us so freely, and I merely wished to emphasize that gratitude."

Elizabeth was touched by the woman's sincerity and she smiled and patted her hand. "No insult taken, my dear. We're just glad to have you and your husband as a part of our little community. I haven't been into town to see your art gallery but Maggie Evans tells me you have a wonderful collection."

A smile lit up the delicate beauty's face. "Nicholas is a genius; he knows fine art that often escapes other critics until much later. You must come and see it soon."

"I'd like that very much," Elizabeth said, stepping to one side as her brother came up to them. "Roger, you should let Mr. Tannek see some of your paintings."

"You are an artist?" Varina asked, taking Roger's hand. "But of course you are--I can see that in the sensitivity of your hands."

Roger pulled his hand free, glaring at Varina. "I don't need your patronizing, Mrs. Tannek. I don't paint anymore," he said curtly.

"Ah, I understand. The creative flow has stopped," she said, not at all insulted by his rudeness. "It is most difficult, is it not? But I have seen it happen in other artists and always it returns. You must have patience, Mr. Collins. Now if you will excuse me, I have other guests to greet." She bestowed a brilliant smile on the pair, then turned and crossed the polished parquet floor.

"Roger, that was uncalled for," Elizabeth scolded in a hushed voice. "She was merely being--"

"I know what she was being," Roger cut in. "Leave me alone, Elizabeth." He snatched a glass of champagne from a tray as a waiter passed by, gulped its contents and followed the waiter for another glass.

Elizabeth looked after him worriedly, then turned as a rich English voice spoke beside her. "Good evening, Elizabeth."

"Hello, Barnabas. It's nice to see you here tonight. You've been rather reclusive."

Barnabas Collins raised an eyebrow at that, but then acknowledged her observation with the comment, "Yes, I fear my business has prevented me from paying many social calls."

"I hope your health is better, Barnabas," Elizabeth said. "Have you recovered from your illness?"

"My illness," Barnabas repeated with a trace of bitterness. "I'm feeling

quite my old self, I'm afraid." There was great sadness in his eyes that his smile didn't quite hide.

"I'm so glad," Elizabeth said, missing the emotion behind his words. "You must come up to the house for dinner."

"I'm not up to eating just yet," Barnabas told her, his gaze going past her to survey the assembled guests. "Did Miss Winters come with you?"

"She begged off, said she had a terrible headache. I think she was just nervous about meeting so many new people." Elizabeth confided, leaning towards her cousin. "I heard her tell Mrs. Johnson she didn't feel it was a governess' place to socialize with her employers. She's such a dear, sweet girl."

"I quite agree," Barnabas said softly, his heart yearning for the love denied him once more by his cursed state.

"David seems fond of her, too."

"Yes." Barnabas' gaze swept the room once more, then rested on the raven-curled woman standing in the midst of a knot of admirers. "Is that our hostess?"

"Oh, yes. Come, let me introduce you to Mrs. Thanos-Tannek."

He followed as she crossed the drawing room and spoke to the woman, who turned to them with a smile.

Elizabeth said, "I would like you to meet my cousin Barnabas Collins, from the British branch of our family."

"Then you are far from home, Mr. Collins," Varina said, offering him her hand. "As are my husband and I."

"I hope you will soon think of Collinsport as your second home, Mrs. Thanos-Tannek," Barnabas said, bowing slightly as he clasped her hand. "I have certainly found a home here."

"Collinsport is lovely," Varina said. "I'm sure Nicholas and I will be very happy here." Head tilted, she stared into his eyes. "You have a great deal of sadness in your heart," she said softly, wrapping her fingers around his.

Barnabas was shaken by the intensity of her sympathy and perception. "I have known sadness," he admitted, unable to drag his gaze from hers. "But now I am with family, making new friends and am--content."

"Content is a far cry from happy, wouldn't you say, Mr. Collins?" she said, letting go of his hand and turning her head.

Freed from her gaze, Barnabas regained control of his composure. "One should never try to gauge what is happiness for another," he said, eyes narrowed. What game was she playing?

"Unless you know that someone quite well--as my Nicholas knows me," she said, bright black eyes shining as she spied her husband. "Nicholas, this is Barnabas Collins, Elizabeth's British cousin."

The man was taller than Barnabas, about six foot four, he would guess. His shoulders were broad, and the muscles beneath his jacket were apparent despite the well-fitting tailoring. His jaw was square, his cheekbones high and dark brows slanted over dark eyes. "My pleasure, Mr. Collins," he said in a well-modulated voice as he offered his hand.

His grip was firm, and Barnabas realized he was taking his measure. Careful not to reveal his vampire strength, Barnabas gripped the other man's hand in a firm handshake.

"Poor Mr. Collins is far from home," Varina told her husband, her eyes meeting his. "As are we."

"Indeed?" he questioned, looking at Barnabas with interest. "Then we have something in common, Mr. Collins."

"Perhaps, "Barnabas said noncommittally. "You are not natives of this country, then?"

"My homeland is Crete," Varina said. "Have you visited there, Mr. Collins?"

"No, I cannot claim to have traveled to the Mediterranean," he replied. "Although I do know the islands of the Caribbean rather well."

"Really. You must tell me about them," she said, smiling in a way that reminded him of Josette. "But what a poor hostess you must think me. Will you have a glass of wine and something to eat?"

"Thank you, but no. I'm sure I'll find something to my taste later," he



said, smiling at her. Yes, it had to be the similarity to his beloved Josette that was so familiar to him. Varina Thanos-Tannek was delicate of feature with long-lashed black eyes and pouting red lips. Everything about her was exquisite and sensual, and he felt the hateful gnawing of bloodlust in his soul. "If you will excuse me, I see someone I should speak with--business, you understand," he said hastily, anxious to remove himself from her disturbing presence in the hopes it would ease his growing need.

"Certainly," Varina said, her eyes strangely sympathetic as he moved away from them.

Nicholas frowned as he watched the other man. Then he returned his attention to his guests.

Barnabas walked through the crowd to the open doors leading to the terrace, and stepped outside. He stood with his face lifted to the moonlight, taking deep breaths of the cool night air.

It was wrong to lust after another man's wife, but then what was he but a monster, a vile creature of evil? Victoria had flung those very words at him upon her return from the past. She had looked at him with the fear and disgust that had been in Josette's eyes the night she'd leapt to her death on Widow's Hill rather than live as a vampire's bride. Such a creature would not hesitate to take what he wanted, would not let morals stand in his way.

"Barnabas?"

He turned, and scowled at the woman standing in the shadows. "Carolyn, what do you want?"

"You know what I want," she purred, going up to him and running her hand along his arm.

"Not now," Barnabas dismissed her, pushing the questing hand away. "You're being indiscreet, Carolyn. I will come to you when the time is right. Go along now, and enjoy the party."

"I'm not a child!" Carolyn protested. "Don't treat me like one, Barnabas."

"Then don't act like one. You're behaving like a spoiled brat who wants her way and wants it now. You will obey me, Carolyn." His gaze bored into her, bending her will to his.

She stared into his eyes, then lowered her gaze sullenly. "Yes, Barnabas. Don't make me wait too long." She drew away from him slowly, glancing at him from beneath her lashes. "You want her, don't you?"

"Carolyn..."

"Just remember--you promised me we'd be together, Barnabas. Forever!" She turned and walked away into the lighted house.

Barnabas made a sound of frustration and turned back to stare across the darkened grounds, his hands clenched at his sides. This time it was different. Always before he had been able to assuage the bloodlust by turning to any woman. Tonight, though, he felt no desire for Carolyn, nor, surprisingly, for Victoria. Only Varina...

*

The moon was high in the sky when the last guest finally left the Tannek house. In the garden Barnabas watched and waited, fighting the urge to call her to him.

"Leave this until tomorrow, Liam," Varina told their manservant, indicating the party remnants scattered about the drawing room. "Call the service and request some cleaning help. Nicholas, we must talk," she said to her husband, taking his arm.

"About Mr. Collins? Yes, I believe we must," he said, patting her hand as it rested on his arm. "He is the one."

"You sensed it too, then. He is the rogue we are seeking," she said with a frown as they walked to the French doors. "Yet I also sensed a great deal of agony, of anger and sadness."

"Not everyone adapts well to such a life, my heart," Nicholas said, smiling at her.

"It is more than that," she insisted, looking out over the garden as they stood on the terrace. "Evil surrounds him, trying to claim his soul, but he fights it."

"You are more sensitive than I to these things," Nicholas told her.

From his hiding place in the shadows, Barnabas heard the murmur of their voices, but they spoke in a language foreign to him. Guilt gnawed at his conscience, but he pushed it aside and concentrated on the woman. His influence over her would not be as strong as if he had tasted of her blood, but she would not be able to resist the lure of his call.

"Varina?" Nicholas said when her attention focused on a distant point in the garden. "My heart, what is wrong?"

"He is out there," she whispered, going to the edge of the terrace. "He is calling me."

"You? But--"

"I shall go to him, and you follow--but not too closely. We don't want to frighten him away."

"He is dangerous," Nicholas cautioned, his hand at her elbow. "I cannot allow--"

"It is the only way," she said in gentle protest. "You know he will not come to us and we cannot allow him to continue in his crude manner. We can help him, but first we must confront him. He will run from you, but I can approach him safely."

"I don't like it," Nicholas said, frowning as he looked over the garden. "He could hurt you--"

"But he won't," she interrupted, touching his cheek. "You'll be there to protect me, beloved."

Nicholas signed, and kissed the palm of her small hand. "I can see that you are determined in this, my heart, so we will do as you wish. But if he hurts you--"

"Wait here for five minutes, then follow," she said, kissing him to silence his protests.

Nicholas stood on the terrace and watched as she slipped into the shadows. He disliked the risks she took, but that was part of what made her so special--her willingness to help others no matter what the cost to herself. But he would not hesitate to kill Barnabas Collins if he tried to harm Varina.

Varina hurried along the moonlit path, anxious to confront their guest and reassure him before Nicholas' arrival. She had to have him pacified or else he and Nicholas would attack each other.

"Don't be afraid."

Varina turned to find Barnabas standing in her path. "I'm not afraid," she said, smiling at him. "I've come to help you."

"Help me? Yes, you'll help me," he said, taking her by the shoulders and pulling her towards him. "I am sorry..."

"Sorry? Whatever for?" she asked, placing the palms of her hands against his chest to hold him off. "You must come back to the house, Barnabas, and listen to what Nicholas and I have to say."

Barnabas snarled and threw his head back so that his eyes glowed red in the moonlight, and his fangs glistened. "I have to do this," he growled, lowering his head over her throat.

"You're making a mistake!" Varina cried, pushing against him with all her strength.

His fangs grazed her neck when she thrust him away from her. Startled by her unusual strength, he staggered back and stared at her, his breath ragged.

"Listen to me, Barnabas," she pleaded. "We can help you--it doesn't have to be this way."

"I--don't understand," Barnabas muttered.

"Come back with me to the house and we'll discuss everything." She held out her hand toward him. When he hesitated, she added softly, "I know what you are, Barnabas Collins."

Panic filled his eyes and he whirled to run, only to find his path blocked by

Nicholas Tannek.

Barnabas grappled with the taller man, his panic increasing as he found his strength matched by Nicholas'. He drew his lips back in a grimace, exposing his fangs and snarling bestially.

Nicholas snarled in return, and the moonlight revealed his own fangs as he lunged at an astonished Barnabas, forcing him to the ground.

"No, Nicholas!" Varina cried as her lover knelt above Barnabas, his hands fastened around his opponent's throat. "I'm all right--he didn't hurt me, Nicholas!"

"Stay back, Varina," Nicholas said hoarsely, trying to leash his anger.

"Nicholas--!"

Barnabas stared into his assailant's eyes. "Kill me--if you can, vampire," he rasped. "Spare me this hellish existence." The red of bloodlust had faded from his dark eyes, and he waited for Nicholas' decision.

Nicholas met his gaze, then turned his head as Varina touched his shoulder. "You're well, my heart?"

"Very well," she assured him. "Please let him up, Nicholas."

Nicholas hesitated for a moment, then released his grip on the other man's throat and stood up. He took Varina by the shoulders and studied her in the moonlight as if to assure himself that she spoke the truth.

Rubbing his throat, Barnabas sat up and watched the couple. "You did me no favor, madam. I would have welcomed death, to be free of this cursed life."

"Cursed? You see, Nicholas, he does need our help," Varina said, turning in his embrace to look at Barnabas.

"Help? No one can help me," Barnabas declared, getting to his feet and dusting himself off. "Angelique has seen to that."

"Angelique?"

"Even her name is a curse," Barnabas spat. "She will never let me be."

"We shall see about that," Varina declared, looking up at her husband. "We must help him, beloved."

"Beloved? You can call him your beloved? Surely you must know what he is," Barnabas sneered, looking at the tall figure that held her so close.

"But of course," she said, leaning her head against Nicholas. "He is my love, my soul, my reason for being. Without him, there is no life."

Barnabas tilted his head as he looked at them. She was certainly an odd woman... "So. You know my secret, and I know yours, sir," he said to Nicholas. "What happens now?"

Nicholas snorted. "You should be grateful we found you, Collins, and not representatives of the Brotherhood. Even amoral vampires have a standard of behavior. Even they frown upon the indiscriminate murder of mortals, when it threatens their own lives. And the Brotherhood's methods of dealing with rogue vampires are not so lenient as ours."

Barnabas frowned, plainly bewildered. "I don't know this 'Brotherhood' you mention."

"Well, that's something, at any rate," Nicholas said. "This is scarcely the place to discuss things--come into the house, Collins."

Intrigued, yet wary, Barnabas glanced at the sky, then nodded slowly. "As you like." It was still two hours until dawn, and he was filled with curiosity about this vampire.

Settled in the small parlor before a fire, Barnabas looked up at his hosts. "I have always believed myself unique. Are you saying there are others--a culture of vampires?"

"Of course," Varina commented, drawing his gaze. "Vampires have existed side by side with humans from the dawn of time."

"And how do you know this?" Barnabas asked. "He has told you, I suppose."

Varina smiled, her gaze lingering on Nicholas. "Oh, yes, he has taught me much--over the centuries."

"The...centuries?" Barnabas repeated faintly. "What do...are you saying...?"

"Didn't you know? Vampires can always sense their own kind. That's how I knew what you are, when I probed your mind. Did you not sense it?"

"No. I told you, I thought I was alone, a freak of Angelique's creation. Even now I find it hard to fathom, that there are others of my own accursed nature. Why are you here? Already there are problems with the authorities and if you begin terrorizing the populace--"

"But there is no need to terrorize anyone, Barnabas. There is no need to kill," Varina said gently.

"You never feel the bloodlust, the burning need to kill? How can you say you are a vampire?" Barnabas said, standing up. "You're very clever, trying to gain my trust. Was the next step to drive a stake through my heart while I lie helpless in my coffin? I would welcome such release!"

"A coffin? But why do you--oh, Nicholas," Varina said, turning to her husband. "He does need us."

"I do *not* need you, madam," Barnabas retorted, "nor any of your so-called offers of help." His tone dripped sarcasm. "I accepted Julia Hoffman's 'help' and became her experimental subject... The cure *failed*. I know I can never be human again, and I will not try. I know what I am."

"No, I suspect you do not," Nicholas said quietly, meeting Barnabas' eyes. "Did the one who made you tell you nothing at all of our life?"

Barnabas laughed bitterly. "A *witch* made me, Tannek. I have destroyed everyone I have ever loved, just as she said I would."

"But it does not have to be that way," Varina said, sitting beside him and taking his hand. "It's true you cannot be mortal, but you can certainly be humane, if not human. Nicholas and I have never killed for blood, never fed on terror. The sharing of life is a beautiful thing, Barnabas, and should be done with reverence, not hate or terror."

Barnabas shook his head, pulling his hand from her grasp. "The bloodlust cannot be controlled. A great terrible rage burns within me and I strike out as an animal would, forced to do repulsive acts in order to survive."

"Did no one guide your Change?"

"Guide? You make it sound as if there was a choice," Barnabas snorted, standing before the fire. "As if anyone would willingly become such a vile creature."

He stared into the flames before him and did not see the anguished glance Varina sent Nicholas, nor the comforting hand he placed on her shoulder. She reached up and clasped his hand, then said quietly, "I did not consider Nicholas a vile creature, when he told me of his nature. And no matter what you think of us, there is always a choice."

"Not for me," Barnabas said, his fist clenching.

Nicholas said, "Tell us of your experience, Barnabas Collins." His tone was calm, his voice compelling, and Barnabas turned to look at him.

"Why do you care?"

Varina answered, "You're not alone any more, Barnabas. Tell us what made you this way."

"A woman's jealousy," Barnabas said, wondering why he was being so open with these strangers. Could they truly offer him hope? "She was maid to my fiancee and I made the mistake of--" Being an 18th century gentleman, he found it awkward to speak so bluntly in front of Varina.

"Having sex with her?" Varina asked helpfully, shocking him. "Come, Barnabas, I'm well over 650 years old so I am quite aware of what happens between men and women."

"One still does not *speak* of such matters in front of a lady," he said stiffly, reprimanding her.

"*Touché*, my heart," Nicholas chuckled.

Varina wrinkled her nose at him, and turned back to Barnabas. "This maid set her cap for you?"

He sighed and nodded. "The Collins family was wealthy even then. I was the eldest of my father's sons, the inheritance would have been mine. Angelique undoubtedly thought to better her station through a liaison with me. Of course it was impossible, and I told her so." He glanced at the fire. "I was in love with Josette duPres." For a moment he seemed lost in his memories, and the others did

not disturb him.

At last Barnabas went on. "Angelique was a native of Martinique, daughter of a witch, and a witch herself. She came here, to Collinwood, as part of Josette's wedding party in the spring of 1790. And she brought with her the greatest evil I have ever known."

"When a witch embraces evil, her power knows no bounds," Nicholas said, frowning at the low-burning flames in the fireplace. "This may not be as simple as we thought, my heart."

"Simple?!" Barnabas exploded. "You dare to call the tragedy Angelique has wrought simple?"

"Barnabas, you misunderstand," Varina said hastily. "We thought you were a rogue vampire bent on an existence of terror and destruction, and we were going to convince you to give up that lifestyle. Now we see you have not had instruction on our life and instead need our guidance.

"I see," he said ironically," You think you can redeem my soul." He bowed his head, his shoulders slumping. "I have destroyed so many innocents, ravaged them like the beast I've become... I did not even remember attacking Millicent. When I came to my senses kneeling over her, her blood..." He covered his face with his hands. "And all the others since that night--I am surely lost!"

"No," Varina said, going to him and placing a gentle hand on his arm. "You never wanted to do those things, Barnabas." She drew his hands away from his face and met his haunted dark eyes with her own. "Did you?"

"No," he said honestly, his gaze fixed on her lovely face as if hoping she would be able to change him simply by pitying him. "I could not help myself!" He sank down onto the sofa. "After the night I--returned, I did horrible things. Millicent, Aunt Abigail, that poor wretch in the town...I revealed myself to my mother, and drove her mad. I frightened the children--Daniel, my poor Sarah...they all ran from me, even Josette.

"It was my father who faced the truth of what I had become. I begged him to use the stake, to put me at rest. But he couldn't kill me, even when I had pointed out that in truth I was already dead. He chained me in my coffin, and there I remained for two centuries...until I was released." His mouth quirked upward. "I wish I had the courage to put an end to this existence. But the instinct for self-preservation is very strong."

"Yes, it is," Nicholas agreed, looking troubled. "You have not been here long, then?"

"Long enough," Barnabas said. He started up at the distant sound of a crowing rooster. "I've stayed too long; it's nearly dawn. I must go!"

"Wait," Varina began, lifting a hand to deter him.

"I cannot!" He started for the French doors, one of which had been left ajar.

"Will you promise to return to talk with us?" she persisted.

"Perhaps," he said over his shoulder, not breaking his stride as he moved swiftly out of the room and across the terrace.

The Tanneks followed him, pausing in the doorway as they saw Barnabas' tall form reach the edge of the lawn. There was a blur of motion, a flutter of wings, and a huge bat flew away into the lightening sky.

"Nicholas," breathed Varina, a hand at her throat. "How is it possible?"

"Witchcraft," he said, his brows furrowed. "I'm out of my depth here, Varina. I think we'd better send for someone better versed in the old arts." Nicholas was a doctor, a man of science, but he knew better than to discount the powers of magick. "This is a bad business, my heart. It's awkward enough that he's so untutored, little better than a fledgling vampire, but he is not quite like our kind. He is dangerous, Varina."

"But he doesn't *want* to be," she argued, slipping her hand into his. "We must help him, even if he is not exactly like us. We can't abandon him, Nicholas; he has no one else to turn to, no one to help ease his pain."

"I know." He kissed her temple and guided her back into the house. "I'll have Liam send a telegram to New York. Will that do?"

"It's an excellent beginning," she said, smiling. "She will know what to do, I'm sure."

*

"And this 'old friend' you wish me to meet, Tannek," Barnabas was saying, "is she another of your 'civilized' vampires?"

"Hardly," said a woman's voice behind him, and he turned to acknowledge its owner, noting that Tannek rose from his chair to do the same. "Though I'd not put such venom in the phrase."

The stranger was as small and fine-boned as Mrs. Tannek, but there the similarity ended. Despite her casual clothing and the rain drying in her dark-blond hair, there was a cool elegance about her that reminded him of a Siamese cat. She seemed lithe rather than fragile; and he could not begin to fathom the mind that looked out from behind the smoke screen of midnight-blue almond eyes.

"Fine circumstances these are for a reunion with old friends, Nicholas Tannek," she chided, a smile belying her tone.

"I assume you don't mean the weather," Nicholas answered ruefully. "It is good to see you, though, and I am grateful you came." He turned to Barnabas. "Allow me to introduce Liara Kelloran; Liara, Barnabas Collins."

"An honor, Miss Kelloran," Barnabas intoned politely, with a slight bow that seldom seemed appropriate in this mannerless age.

"And you, Mr. Collins." She gave him a long, measuring look above the smile, then turned to her hostess. "The house is lovely, Varina. I might not be leaving if you're not careful; the room Liam gave me is nicer than my own."

The other woman's face lit up. "You know you're always welcome; it's been a long time. It seems we only see you when there is some crisis."

"There's always a crisis," Liara replied, taking the chair Nicholas indicated while he drew up another. "You'll find me very blunt, Mr. Collins, especially when the balance of things is threatened. You're the reason Nicholas cabled me, aren't you?"

The other guest was taken aback. "So they have told me; but not told you, I think. Mrs. Tannek has said that vampires recognize their own, yet you claim you are not. Not even Maggie Evans has perceived the nature of my curse, yet you speak as if it were plain as ink."

"To me it is, but don't be getting concerned about it. This Maggie you mention may have the necessary talents, but few these days have the knowledge and discipline to use them effectively."

So that was what hid behind her eyes. "You're a witch, then. I should have guessed."

Liara nodded, unperturbed by the accusation. "You say that the same way you say 'vampire.' I'd wondered why Nicholas and Varina didn't tell you, but now I see."

"It's more than that," Varina put in gently. "A witch was responsible for what he is."

"I thought as much. The taint of blood-magick is unmistakable, and it runs deep in this area." Barnabas was now eyeing her suspiciously, and though he had not moved physically she could sense an unconscious drawing-in that kept his presence as far from hers as possible.

Avoiding any abruptness that might be taken as a threat, Liara approached the wary vampire, pulling a silver chain out from inside her blouse to show him the small pendant it held. "Do you know what this means?"

Fleetingly he thought it was all a trick, and half expected a cross that could render him helpless; but then he saw it was merely further proof of her true allegiance. "You call that a pentagram, do you not? And hide it inside your clothing like the vile symbol it is."

Liara sighed. "Only because I changed clothes in a hurry after getting drenched in that storm. I've nothing to hide, Barnabas Collins, even from the ignorant who react as you just did. I said earlier there was a balance to things; that's exactly what this means. The balance of nature, the equilibrium between light and dark, and the clear perception of the five senses--though I admit some of us use more--to know when something is awry." She paused a second to let that sink in. "At least, that's what it means in its proper orientation, with the

point up like this one. When it's inverted, so too is its significance. Satanists, for example, invert both the pentagram and the cross to make a mockery of the values each represents."

"A pretty speech," Barnabas allowed, his tone sarcastic.

"Lord and Lady! I thought they called your time the Age of Reason!"

The outburst surprised him, and he felt his hold on his own temper slipping. "And just how much meaning do you suppose that high-flown phrase retains for me now? What Angelique did was beyond the bounds of reason!"

"It was beyond more bounds than that," Liara retorted, her hint of an accent suddenly springing into a full-blown brogue, "and I am here to try and set right what your Angelique so carelessly disrupted! This whole town echoes with her actions, and I've no doubt it affects more lives than yours; so whether you choose to believe me is your affair. I can't be helping those who won't help themselves." She narrowed her eyes. "And even if you won't believe me, don't be taking it into your head to do me a hurt. You might catch me off guard and you might not."

"Liara, Barnabas, please." Distressed, Varina laid a small hand on the shoulder of each of her guests. "This will get us nowhere."

Both backed down, sheepishly, at the gentle reminder of the situation. "I apologize, Miss Kelloran," Barnabas said after taking a moment to collect himself.

"I'm sorry too," Liara replied. "The last thing you need from me is a browbeating. I try to keep my temper under better control than that, even at the worst of times. I've learnt that from hard experience."

"I confess to some confusion about that," Barnabas remarked as they all settled back into their former places. "You speak of 'hard experience', and Tannek refers to you as an old friend, yet you cannot be more than twenty-three."

She smiled sadly. "None of us is what he or she appears, Barnabas. I'm as mortal as anyone else, true, and if you did catch me off guard you *could* hurt or kill me if you chose." A trace of mischief crept into the smile momentarily. "Not that I'm often off guard. But that wasn't always the case, and I wasn't always mortal either. Through a magickal mishap that would take far too long to explain, I remained physically exactly as I was at nineteen for nearly ten centuries. Three years ago the spell was broken, and now I am for all intents and purposes a perfectly ordinary twenty-two-year-old woman."

"You have never been ordinary," Nicholas contradicted.

The Irishwoman chuckled. "Perhaps. I suppose I've never been quite sure what 'ordinary' meant." Turning back to Barnabas, she went on, "But it's your story, not mine, that concerns us now. You said this witch was named Angelique; I need to know everything you can tell me about her and about what happened to you."

*

Dawn was approaching by the time his tale was finished, and Liara's skillful prompting had brought out many details he had thought forgotten or irrelevant.

At last he said, "Miss Kelloran, I fear I must return home now."

"Already?" She looked at her watch, startled. "Well, I want to properly ward this house before I do anything else anyway; and that will take a good part of today. Tonight I'll want to see your house, particularly Angelique's room, and the place where you buried her, if I may."

Barnabas nodded, then asked hesitantly, "Do you believe you can help me?"

Liara thought a moment before answering. "Help you, yes. Can I make you mortal again? Doubtful. Tonight, after I think about what you've told me and give the imbalances in this area a little closer scrutiny, I'll have a better idea of what I'm dealing with. We'll talk about it then."

After Barnabas had taken his leave of them, Varina turned sorrowful eyes to her remaining guest. "Is the matter so serious, then?"

"I'm not entirely sure I can handle it," Liara replied honestly. "As I said before, I'm clearly up against blood-magick, and maybe worse. This Angelique rode roughshod over the natural laws of power without regard for the consequences, but if I don't follow the rules in cleaning up her mess I could do even worse damage."

"You asked several times if he was certain it was *vodoun* she used," Nicholas remarked. "Why is that so significant?"

"Vodoun is a legitimate religion, and as such its basic purpose is to help maintain the balance of nature. The spirits it recognizes--*loa*, they're called--are a well-balanced lot on the whole." She frowned. "As a general rule, *vodoun*'s believers instill in their children a particularly healthy respect for that balance; because they deal so directly with the spirit world, it isn't hidden in a complex body of dogma. But from what Barnabas tells us, Angelique obviously had no such respect for anything outside her own selfish pleasure. And if she had no concern for those taboos, she could well have set some of the nastier spirits to work for her own purposes. It's a relatively easy and very immediate way to raise a great deal of power--and an even greater debt." She hesitated, not liking the conclusion she was reaching. "The problem is, they wouldn't stop at destroying her to exact it. In fact, they might not even start with it--especially if she could bring them more and tastier things. Which she evidently didn't hesitate to do."

"What have you gotten us into, my heart?" Nicholas asked, taking Varina's hands in his.

"You're not suggesting we abandon him? If Liara is right about the evil that threatens Collinsport we can't in all good conscience just leave," Varina chided.

Nicholas' expression grew stubborn and he opened his mouth to respond, but Liara spoke first.

"Now, now, this is too early in the game to be getting so pessimistic, Nicholas. And you know Varina's right. We cannot leave this alone now; it would only get worse. There's a very practical reason for the rules I live by, as you should know by now. Power calls to power; ignoring it doesn't make it go away, it simply makes you a passive target." She raised an eyebrow at him. "The rogues always assume we are competitors."

"I have heard you make that observation yourself, beloved," Varina reminded him gently.

"Yes, but..." Nicholas looked from his wife to their guest and back, recognizing the identical, implacable expressions. "But I suspect that whatever happens, it will be easier than opposing both of you."

Liara smiled. "You're a wise man, Nicholas Tannek. And now, with your permission, I'd best set to work on those wards."

"What does that entail, exactly?"

"From your point of view? Predominantly my sitting on the floor until noon or so. After that, you most likely won't perceive any difference; it certainly won't interfere with your normal comings and goings. But it will most certainly interfere with any magickal attack that may be sent against this house, and give me a good sense of who or what has sent it. I'd also like to try putting some personal shields on you two, and on Barnabas if he allows it."

"All this sounds very well," Varina put in, "but first Liam is bringing some breakfast for you. Surely you can take time for food, if not rest."

"Varina, the eternal mother," Liara chuckled, looking at Nicholas. "Some things are constant."

Nicholas nuzzled his lips against the palm of Varina's hand. "She tried to mother me when first we met in that prison cell and ever since she has tried to mother the world."

"Someone has to," Varina said with a sniff. Nicholas smiled and kissed her.

*

Barnabas sat in his armchair, fingers steepled before him as he mused on the occurrences of the last two nights. The clock on the mantelpiece chimed six, and he glanced up, then rose to light one of the candelabra beside it.

"I'll do that, Mr. Barnabas," Willie Loomis said, bustling into the room. He took over the task, adding, "I straightened up everything, just like you said. When are your visitors gettin' here, sir?"

"Soon, I imagine," Barnabas said, crossing to the window and pulling aside

the heavy drapes to look out.

"I think it's terrific you got friends coming to see you, Barnabas," Willie declared with sincerity.

The vampire smiled ironically. "Do you?"

"Yeah, sure. You been sulkin' something awful ever since Miss Vickie came back--" He broke off as Barnabas turned and glared at him. "Uh, Mr. Barnabas?"

"What is it, Willie?"

"Do you really think they can help get the--" Willie lowered his voice and threw a fearful glance over his shoulder, "--curse off of you?"

Barnabas sighed. "I don't know, Willie."

"I sure hope so, Mr. Barnabas."

"Thank you. There's the door knocker. Let my guests in, please, and I'll finish with the candles."

Willie nodded and hurried to answer the door. He found Nicholas' tall form intimidating, and stood for a moment, half-hiding behind the door.

"Is Mr. Collins in? He is expecting us, I believe," Varina said, smiling at Barnabas' devoted servant.

"Oh, uh, yes, ma'am, come right in," Willie stammered, stepping back and looking nervously up at Nicholas.

None of the trio failed to notice that, but Willie scooted off the moment he had shown them into the parlor. "Good evening," Barnabas greeted them. "I suspect, Miss Kelloran, you wish to lose no time with pleasantries?"

She favored him with a sympathetic smile. "Perceptive man. But you make it sound as if I'm calling you out on the field of honor!"

Grimacing at her choice of phrase, their host replied, "No. But I do confess I still have my doubts about the entire proposition."

"Doubts are a good thing to have under most any circumstances," Liara assured him. "Barnabas, I'd like to try and set up some shielding around you, if I may. I'm afraid I wasn't able to do much for Nicholas and Varina, but you're different; and it may be you need more protection than any of us."

"Your protection comes two hundred years too late," Barnabas said, dark eyes brooding.

"I know, and I can't help but feel it a personal failure when a chaos-bringer like Angelique is permitted to work her evil unchecked. But it's impossible to know where I am needed at any given time; when this wrong was done you, I was in Vienna, following a false hope I thought might break my own bonds. And others of my ilk are precious few and far between." She took his hands, meeting the dark gaze without a hint of fear; that alone went far toward restoring his tentative trust. "And believe you this, Barnabas Collins: if you allow this despair to consume you, she will have the greatest victory of all, the destruction of your soul, which, contrary to what you may believe, she has not accomplished."

"Perhaps," he conceded, more to avoid further argument than out of any acceptance of her words. He knew himself for the damned creature he was, even if she did not. "Very well, then, what must I do for this 'shielding'?"

"Start by visualizing the form of defense that makes the most sense to you--steel walls, unbreakable glass, whatever. My job is to augment your own energy, and shape the patterns into a protective field specifically keyed to your identity." She hesitated. "Then we hope the whole arrangement doesn't slide right off again, as it did with Nicholas and Varina."

"Comforting," Barnabas said dryly. "Then let us--"

He was interrupted by an explosion of childish, unbalanced laughter, and the Tanneks both gasped at the golden-haired figure suddenly hovering in their midst. "How charming," she said with exaggerated sweetness. "More intriguing than that meddling fool in the town, but still a little girl." Purest malice glittered in the smile. "Would you like a taste of real power, *ma petite*?"

Without further warning, the apparition took on a brighter glow and launched itself at Liara. Seemingly from nowhere a small silver dagger appeared in the Irish witch's hand. Shouting a single syllable of apparent nonsense, she slashed up through her attacker's "body", and with a heart-stopping shriek, it vanished.

Liara held the blade high a few moments longer, then, when she was quite



certain the thing was gone, returned it to the sheath tucked in her left sleeve. She turned to the others a trifle shakily, announcing, "This is bad." The room gave a disagreeable lurch, and her knees gave way, pitching her against a startled Barnabas. "Backlash," she managed through the dizziness. "Lashed out hard without preparing. All right in a moment; lots of water, juice if you have it, please!"

"Willie!" Barnabas called immediately, guiding the unsteady witch to the nearest chair.

The look on Varina's face would have chilled Liara's blood had she looked at her just then.

"Yes, Barnabas?" Willie asked, peering cautiously into the room.

"A pitcher of juice--now!" Barnabas ordered, barely sparing the man a glance.

"Yes sir, Barnabas sir," Willie agreed, eager to leave the psychically-tense room.

"I shouldn't have involved you in this," NIcholas said, taking Liara's pulse.

"Don't be absurd," she said, though she made no move to put off his concerned examination. "This has happened before, it'll happen again." She stifled a laugh as her clearing vision revealed Nicholas' worried face. "It's probably quite elevated, and B.P.'s down. Most likely a mild concussion, and I definitely need fluids and electrolytes. Far from life-threatening, I assure you."

"How fortunate for you," Varina said, her tone solicitous.

Barnabas looked at her, his expression faintly puzzled. He turned as Willie hurried into the room with a tray bearing a glass pitcher of orange juice and three tumblers. "Bring that over here, Willie. Thank you." He poured a glass full of juice and offered it to Liara.

"Thank you," she said, accepting it gratefully and taking a long swallow.

Willie stood by awkwardly, holding his burden and looking anxiously from Barnabas to the others. "Is she all right, Mr. Barnabas? She looks awful pale..."

Liara looked to her host and shrugged slightly before gulping down the rest of the juice, leaving Willie's employer to decide what to tell him.

Apparently the odd little man had Barnabas' confidence, for he said truthfully, "She will be all right, Willie, no thanks to Angelique."

The servant blanched, abruptly setting the tray on a nearby table. "Oh, uh...okay. You need anything else, ma'am?"

Liara cast a wan smile at him as Barnabas poured another glass of juice for her. "No, thank you. I appreciate the offer."

"You may go, Willie," Barnabas prompted. Willie needed no further encouragement.

Nicholas had also taken note of her pallor, as well as her unevenly-dilated pupils. "As for you," he told her firmly, "anything else you plan will have to wait until you are properly recovered. I will not try to convince you to give up this venture, but I do not intend to send you back to New York in pieces, either."

"Nicholas, this is not the time to be coddling me," Liara insisted. "I need to see...her room, and the place where--"

"No, Miss Kelloran," Barnabas interrupted firmly. "Dr. Tannek is quite right; I will not have you exposed to further danger tonight, particularly on my behalf. I will show you these things when he pronounces you well."

She looked to Varina, not really expecting help from that quarter. "These things have been brewing for two hundred years," the other woman reminded her gently. "Surely they can wait another day or two."

"It seems I'm getting my just desserts, Nicholas," Liara sighed. "This time *you're* ganging up on *me*."

"We most certainly are." Tannek turned to their host. "Please come visit us tomorrow night, Collins, and then we will discuss what is to be done."

When the Tanneks had bundled the dazed witch off to their home, Willie crept nervously into the room, eyeing every shadow uneasily before turning his attention to the vampire who sat staring at the fire. "Barnabas," he began nervously, licking his lips, "what's goin' on? We ain't seen...that person...in a long time. Howcum she hurt your friend?"

"She sensed a rival power, Willie," his employer replied, not looking away from the fire. "Liara Kelloran is also a witch, one who makes it her business to oppose such as Angelique. I had begun to hope her knowledge might succeed where Julia's failed, in lifting this curse from me at last. Now that hope is dwindling."

"Oh." Willie let that sink in a moment. "She's real pretty, that Miss Kelloran, and for a second I kinda thought..."

He trailed off reluctantly, and Barnabas picked up the thread. "You thought my hateful desires had claimed another victim. Not yet, Willie, though I can hardly blame you for suspecting it." He lowered his head between his hands. "Not yet...for all the difference that may make."

*

Nicholas assisted Liara up the front steps to his house, while Varina paused behind them and looked up at the facade. A strange smile curved her sensuous lips, fading quickly as Liam opened the door and ushered his master and their guest inside.

Varina followed them across the threshold. "Liam, Miss Kelloran is unwell. Please bring a large pitcher of water to her bedroom, won't you?"

"And fetch my medical bag," Nicholas called as he guided Liara towards the main staircase. He halted as Liara swayed, putting a hand to her forehead. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know," she muttered. "Something..." She shook her head, then winced. "My head aches--"

"We'll get you up to bed," Nicholas promised.

Varina watched as they turned the corner at the top of the stairs. "Yes," she murmured to herself. "Rest yourself, my little one." She smiled and tossed her hair back. "You will need your strength."

*

The sun was already lowering in the sky when Liara awoke to find Varina laying a cool cloth across her forehead. "Good morning, sleepyhead," her hostess teased gently. "How do you feel?"

"Like I've been hit by a truck," came the answer. "I can't believe I slept so long." She moved to sit up, but Varina kept her hands on the cloth and prevented it.

"Obviously you needed it. Now, don't try to move yet; I will fetch Nicholas."

Head pounding, Liara made no protest as the other woman went in search of her husband. She blinked as Varina passed the mirror by the door--why did she think she had glimpsed something in the glass? It was only mounted for guests' benefit, useless to the Tanneks.

More importantly, why was she still in such a state? Simple backlash should not cause this, yet she was certain Angelique's attack had been completely deflected. Liara ought to have felt only the temporary effect of the sudden drain on her resources. This persistent weakness and disorientation made no sense.

Unless...could Angelique somehow be in this house, sending out her constant waves of negative energy? But the house was shielded, of that Liara was certain. Angelique could not enter this house.

*

"Nicholas? Liara is awake," Varina said, entering his study and draping her arms around his neck as he sat at his desk. Her hands slid down his chest and under his shirt, and her lips nibbled just under his ear.

"How is she feeling?" Nicholas asked absently, his attention on the pleasure of Varina's touch.

"Not as well as you feel, *mon cher*," she whispered in his ear. He wasn't

Barnabas, of course, but this vampire exuded a sensuality that she found irresistible.

"Varina!" Nicholas cried, pulling away from her, his hand on his neck. "What are you doing?! You know it's forbidden for us to share blood." He turned in his chair to stare at her, wondering at the raw desire he saw in her eyes.

"I only wanted to see what it's like," she said with a pout. "I wasn't going to take your blood, just--nip."

"You've never--"

"I wanted to do it," she said, curling up on his lap and looping her arms around his neck. "Why can't we just nip each other? I find it--exciting," she breathed, passion flaring in her dark eyes.

"Because the temptation to draw blood is too great," he reminded her, mesmerized as she stared into his eyes. "It's too dangerous, and you know it."

"But there is excitement in danger," she purred, ripping open his shirt and running her tongue down his throat to his chest.

"What's wrong with you? You usually only act this way after we've been with mortals," Nicholas said, his hand on her shoulders as he held her away from him.

"Perhaps it's all the psychic energy," she said, standing up. "But I can see you're not interested in me, so I suppose you should go check on Liara. The poor girl has taken on more than she can handle, I think."

"Varina--"

"I will go see if there's any sign of Barnabas' arrival. He should be here soon. And I should see if Liam has Liara's tray ready. No doubt she is famished."

"All right," he said slowly, watching her as she went towards the doorway. "Ah--nothing too heavy at first, Varina. Soup, toast and tea should do nicely, I think."

"Whatever you say, darling," she replied, going out of the room.

Nicholas frowned, dabbing at the tiny wound on his neck, then glaring at his reddened fingertips. Something was most assuredly wrong here...

With quick, impatient gestures, he rebuttoned his shirt and straightened his clothing. Then he rose, picked up his medical bag and headed for the guest bedroom.

Liara opened her eyes as Nicholas entered, and he smiled reassuringly at her. "How do you feel?"

"All right," she hedged, drawing a sharp glance from him. "Well, maybe not *all* right," she amended. "My headache's down to a dull throb, so we must be doing something right."

"Hm," Nicholas said, in the noncommittal manner of all doctors throughout time, as he lifted her wrist and checked her pulse against his watch. He dropped her hand and bent over her to examine the pupils of her eyes. "Well, the concussion seems to be behaving itself, Liara. We'll have a light supper up here for you shortly."

"Thank you, Nicholas." She leaned back against the pillow. "I've never experienced anything like this. She should not have been able to do that!"

"Obviously she is very powerful," Varina said, standing in the door with Liara's supper tray. "Perhaps you should reconsider challenging her. I'm afraid she will kill you."

Liara frowned at her, for something in Varina's tone wasn't so much fear as braggadocio. "I'll have to take that chance, Varina. You know as well as I do that this witch and her greed are too dangerous to ignore."

"Then you do fear her--as it should be," Varina said, placing the tray across Liara's lap.

"I do, and I should," Liara agreed evenly. "Just as she should fear me. I can hope she doesn't; that would make my job that much easier."

Varina made no reply, but the Irishwoman could not shake the feeling that the lady of the house was not pleased with her comments.

"You sound very determined," Nicholas noted, covering a sigh.

His patient shook her head sympathetically. "I know you're not happy about all this; the doctor and the knight in you are both determined to confine me to

this bed, correct?"

"It makes good sense, yes."

"I have have never been able to afford much good sense," Liara answered wryly. "Nicholas, whether you like it or not, this is what I do. It always has been."

Barnabas spoke from the doorway. "I *had* hoped to persuade you to abandon this madness."

"You must know better," she admonished him. "All of you, please: I am well aware that Angelique most likely wants to see me dead. She isn't the first, I assure you: and if, ultimately, that's what it takes to defeat her, then I am prepared to go that far."

"You cannot be serious!" Barnabas' shock was evident. "She will not hesitate to destroy you if she can, and she is a most implacable foe."

"So am I," she answered grimly. "That's why I'm still alive. Not to put too fine a point on it, this was my calling long before you were born."

He almost smiled. "A strange notion, that."

"But accurate," Nicholas admitted. "Liara, I fear I will not be able to keep you inactive much longer."

"Right again, Doctor. The longer I wait, the harder this will be. And I can't just give it up and go home; eventually it will follow me." She turned a rueful smile toward Barnabas' frown. "So you see, I have no more choice than you. I may have lived more than my rightful span, but I don't risk my life lightly--and before you protest, I'm not doing it just for you. It must be done." She looked at all three of them in turn, but at last their arguments were exhausted. "Now, I'm going to collect myself, get dressed, and meet you all downstairs in fifteen minutes."

*

"Barnabas, I don't know of a delicate way to put this, and I was hoping it wouldn't come up, but I'm afraid it's important." Liara hesitated, then went on. "Were you with Angelique after you became engaged to Josette?"

His face darkened, but he answered calmly. "Yes."

Liara gently disengaged one tightly-clenched hand from the arm of his chair. Her heart ached for him--she was pouring salt in the wounds--but there was no other way. "Did Josette know?"

"Yes. And she gave me her forgiveness when she asked mine, as if she needed it."

"That's good." She had asked similar questions of many hapless victims over the years, and it never got any easier. But the last question was most important. "Was this before or after Angelique laid her curse?"

He thought a second. "It was after she pronounced it, but before the creature she called up made good on her threat."

Liara nodded sadly. "So I feared."

Barnabas looked sharply at her. "What do you mean? Where is this leading?"

She offered him the small comfort of a kiss on the cheek before answering. "I'm sorry, Barnabas. I can't help you, not in the way you wish. Now, now, look at me. Hear me out." He complied, though the despair etched on his face nearly tore her apart. "It's not fair, and it's not right, and were it up to me you'd be a mortal man and with your Victoria this very evening. But by breaking faith with Josette, you unwittingly made yourself fair game. And by the natural laws of magic, I can't undo what she did to you." She put up a hand to stop whatever he was about to say. "What I *can* do is stop her, destroy her if I must, so that she can cause no more such mischief. *And* so that she can no longer torment you. Without her interference, and with guidance from Nicholas and Varina, you can make your peace with who and what you are. It's not the victory you want, I know, but it *is* a victory, and Angelique's defeat."

"Make peace? Accept the monster that I am? If you cannot end this curse, then end my mimicry of life!" Barnabas cried, impassioned.

"Your vampirism does differ from ours, but I resent your attitude that *all*

vampires are monsters," Varina snapped, black eyes flashing. "You wish the true death? Perhaps we should give you that instead of the guidance to help you live among mortals without fear."

"Varina!" Nicholas protested, shocked by her display of temper.

"Aren't you tired of his self-pity, his constant bemoaning his fate? His own actions, his betrayal, led to this and he should accept it. If he doesn't want our help then we should drop him."

"I can't believe my ears," Liara said, staring at Varina. What had happened to Nicholas' gentle, compassionate lady?

Nicholas took Varina by the shoulders, stared deep into her eyes. "What is wrong, my heart? You're not yourself--"

"I'm simply being pragmatic," she said, faltering as his gaze held hers.

"Perhaps she is correct," Barnabas began.

"No," Nicholas said, his fingers pressing into Varina's shoulders. "Answer me, Varina! What has happened to you?"

Liara raised her head at that, her eyes fixing on the vampiress with intense interest.

"Nothing, I swear. It must be all the psychic energy that's been stirred up," Varina said, cupping Nicholas' face in her hands. "You can see that I am fine, can't you?"

He released her and stepped back, staring at her in horror. "My God, is it possible?"

Varina suddenly clutched at her temples and let loose an ear-shattering scream. "No! Don't listen to her!"

Reacting with the speed of thought, Liara crossed the few steps between them, hissing, "Begorrah, I'm a blind bloody fool!" She took hold of the stricken woman's wrists and pulled her hands away from her face. "Keep up the pressure! Look at me, Varina--hold on!

"I..." Pain and desperation contorted Varina's lovely face, replaced quite suddenly by cold rage. "Mind your manners, little witch!" she snapped, jerking her hands free and backhanding Liara. The savage blow, backed by vampire strength, sent the Irish witch sprawling at Barnabas' feet, and Varina fairly flew out the door.

"Varina, wait!" Nicholas called, running after his wife, but she was out of sight. They heard the front door slam.

"Save your breath, Tannek," Barnabas said behind him. "That was not your lady."

Nicholas turned and found the other vampire kneeling on the floor, cradling the semiconscious woman. "My God, Varina!" he muttered, moving to help.

Collins shook his head. "How could I not have seen? This is hardly the first time she has used that tactic."

"Can you handle Liara? I must go after Varina," Nicholas said, checking the witch's pupils. "She'll have a nasty bruise, but I believe she'll be all right. Varina, on the other hand, is in danger--"

"You mustn't go after her alone," Barnabas interrupted. "Angelique is too dangerous--"

"And she has possessed my wife! What would you do if it were Josette?" Nicholas demanded, lifting Liara in his arms and carrying her to the sofa. "Look after her..."

"I'll be fine," Liara murmured, touching Nicholas' arm. "You'll need my help, Nicholas."

"And mine," Barnabas added, his tone grim as he clenched his silver wolf-headed cane.

Nicholas looked from one to the other, then turned purposefully towards the door. "Then for God's sake, let us hurry!"

*

"Barnabas, that you? Something wrong? How come you're home so early?" Willie asked, looking up from his dinner.

"It's me, Willie, Varina Tannek."

Willie swallowed his bite of sandwich. "Mrs. Tannek? What's wrong? Where's Barnabas?"

"We don't need Barnabas, *cheri*," came the sultry voice from the shadows. "I have come for you, Willie Loomis."

"Me?" Willie squeaked, staring into the shadows. "What for?"

She stepped into the circle of candlelight and Willie gave a little cry. Her black eyes glittered and a feral look dominated her features. "I need you, Willie. I...hunger." She advanced on him, her gaze holding him frozen.

His breath was coming in labored gasps and terror filled his heart. "Mrs. Tannek, why...?!"

She stood over him, hands on his shoulders. "So you fear me, Willie? Good--I need the fear."

Willie screamed as her head bent over his neck and burning pain tore through him.

"NO!" Barnabas shouted from the kitchen doorway.

The woman's head jerked up and she whirled to face him, her open mouth reddened with blood. Behind her, Willie slumped in his chair.

"Leave him be, Angelique," Barnabas said, advancing a step towards them.

She laughed and drew her hand across her lips. "His fear was delicious, Barnabas. Is that how you find it, when you...hunt?"

He made no answer, but lifted the sword-cane so that its point gilttered in the candlelight. "Now, Tannek!"

Varina's head turned at a sound from the shadows, and she screamed as Nicholas lunged, grasping her arms and holding her as she began to struggle.

"Varina, my heart, listen to me," he shouted, hoping she could hear him. "You must fight her. Come back to me! Varina, be strong for me."

"Leave me alone, vampire weakling," Angelique spat, struggling in his grasp. "Nicholas, help me!"

The reversal brought a surge of hope to Nicholas' heart, and he held her close. "Hold on, Varina!" he urged. "We will free you, I swear it!"

As he spoke, Liara had drawn an intricate circle in the air around them with the point of her dagger. A faint glow hung in its trail for a moment, and she closed the line with herself inside. "We will indeed," she promised quietly, midnight eyes focused unblinkingly on Varina. "Nicholas, step away from her. Stand outside the circle and be ready to pull her clear."

Her ice-calm, deadly serious tone brooked no protest, and Tannek moved to obey. "Nicholas, no!" Varina begged, panic in her voice. "Don't leave me!"

"Let him go," Liara ordered simply. Both Tanneks turned to her in shock, and Nicholas stepped uneasily out of the circle.

"Nicholas, please!" Varina's hand reached for her husband, then pulled back as if burned. Furiously she rounded on the Irish witch. "How dare you make me a prisoner? I thought you were my friend!"

Liara did not falter. "I am Varina's friend; you are not she. She would never keep Nicholas from following my instructions, knowing they were necessary. And she would have no difficulty leaving this circle to join him."

Angelique nodded acknowledgment of this, dropping her pretense if not her arrogance. "Very clever, *mademoiselle*. But what do you intend to do about it?" Liara twirled the little silver knife around her fingers; Angelique merely laughed, executing a little pirouette to show off Varina's stolen body. "Surely you won't harm your precious little friend?"

"Perhaps not," Liara allowed. "But were that to become necessary...well, unless I severed her spine, Niamh here could not do her much hurt. You, on the other hand..." She drew the flat of the blade, feather-light, across one borrowed cheek--and Angelique flinched slightly, glowering out of Varina's eyes. "She stores a great deal of power, this bit of silver, and she's served me against greater evil than yours." Angelique remained stonily silent, and Liara matched her glare for glare. "Besides...are you so unsure of your powers that you cannot face me directly?"

In reply, Varina's arms raised slowly, and Nicholas stared as both women's

hair and clothing were whipped by some wild wind. Three feet away, outside the circle, he felt not the slightest breeze. A moment later, Varina stumbled into his arms, and Liara stood facing a taller woman with blonde curls.

"Angelique," Barnabas hissed, eyes blazing with hatred as he looked up from where he stood by Willie's chair, his handkerchief pressed to the servant's wounded neck.

The blonde woman turned and smiled at him. "Yes, *mon cher*, it's your beloved Angelique."

"Nicholas?" Varina whispered, reaching up and touching his face. Her hand trembled, then fell limply to her side as she sagged in his embrace.

"It's all right, my heart," he murmured, lifting her in his arms and holding her close to him. "You've returned to me."

"Very touching," Angelique sneered. "You are good, little witch, but scarcely good enough. If it is a duel you desire, you shall have it!" She raised her hand, and a bolt of energy stabbed at Liara.

Swiftly the Irishwoman raised Niamh and the bolt was deflected, ricocheting in all directions to rebound harmlessly off the invisible circle enclosing the two women.

Angelique screamed in frustration and lunged forward to grapple with her rival.

Calmly Liara stepped back, out of the circle. Slamming her fist into the barrier, Angelique snarled, "Now who is the coward? Now *you* will not face *me* directly?!"

"I could if I wished," Liara responded, not rising to the bait. "But that's not my right; you've done little enough to me." She glanced meaningfully from the trapped woman to Barnabas and Willie and back again. "No, my responsibility here is to set right the disruption your reckless greed has caused."

Angelique stood straighter, a smug little smile on her lips. "Before you can do that, you'll have to kill me--if you can. Will your precious code of conduct allow that?"

"It won't have to." The blonde frowned at her captor, but continued to listen. "Time to pay the piper, Angelique. You have a very high debt, and it's long overdue."

Comprehension dawned on the doll-like face. "No!" Leaning as close to Liara as she dared, Angelique dropped her voice dangerously. "You will be sorry, Liara Kelloran, this I swear to you!"

"I find that hard to imagine," the smaller woman returned coldly. "Even you haven't enough imagination to make me regret this."

"We will see," Angelique muttered darkly.

"We will indeed." Liara raised her arms, much as Angelique had a few moments before, and her voice rang to the rafters. "Hear me, ye spirits who touch our mortal plane! Hear me, in particular, ye who have lent your power to this woman!" A gust of wind whipped through the kitchen, blowing out some of the candles. Willie, now somewhat recovered, cowered behind Barnabas, and all four of them stared at the Irishwoman in open-mouthed shock.

"Before these witnesses, who all have been wronged by Angelique, I name her chaos-bringer and lawbreaker. She had no rightful claim to the innocent lives she has destroyed, and their suffering is not lawful coin for the debt she owes to you. I call upon you to bring her to justice!"

"Innocent!" Angelique repeated. There was laughter in her voice, but desperation in her eyes. She pointed accusingly at Barnabas. "You call him *innocent*--ha!"

"No. But he has paid for his actions many times over, and continues to pay--*for your amusement!*--long after the one he wronged gave him her pardon!" A mutter passed through the room, unseen voices in no discernible words. "And what of her other victims? Was Josette duPres her rightful prey, who thought this woman her dearest friend? What of Jeremiah Collins? Ben Loomis? Little Sarah Collins, only nine years old? Was that child an oathbreaker, that she should die through this woman's reckless scheming?"

"A persuasive argument," Angelique hissed, addressing the unseen spirits, "but I swore to be your servant for all eternity, and your servant I remain. Will you give that up because of her words?"

Liara held her breath; she had not been aware of this ace in the hole. It placed Angelique outside the jurisdiction of mortal magic, and the decision rested solely with the spirits she had sworn to serve. But if her obsessive hounding of Barnabas and those he cared for had been independent of her shadowy masters--and Liara rather suspected it was--then Angelique had more to fear than simple karmic justice.

Their invisible guests seemed to reach some consensus, and Liara's protective circle flared, then abruptly vanished. Angelique grinned her triumph, and took a step toward Liara.

She did not get far; one blink she was there, the next she was gone. Only the echo of her scream and the rippling of the air surrounding her remained to indicate to the five witnesses that she had ever been there.

Willie gulped audibly. "Is she...gone?"

Still brandishing Niamh, Liara stared dully at the empty space Angelique had occupied a moment before. "I...don't know," she began reluctantly.

A rumble filled the drawing room, as of distant thunder, resolving itself into voices. "She is ours," the chorus said. "Judgment has been passed." The rumble grew to the roar of a great wind, then there was stillness.

"Well," Barnabas said after a long moment. "I dare say *that* answers our question."

"Home, Nicholas," Varina pleaded softly, her arms wrapped around his neck. "Rest--for all of us. And food for Liara."

"Yes, of course, my heart," he agreed, kissing her temple. "Collins, bring Willie into the other room and I'll check him over before I take Varina and Liara home."

"Willie? Did she hurt him?" Varina asked, lifting her head.

Nicholas hesitated, then said, "Yes, she did, but I believe he will be fine." He carried her into the drawing room where Barnabas had settled Willie on a sofa. "Sit here for a moment, Varina, while I see to Willie, and then we'll go home."

Varina looked at Liara, who sat in the armchair next to hers. "I can't thank you enough for all you've done, Liara."

The witch turned a weary smile in her direction, passing a hand over her eyes. "My thanks is that you're alive and mostly unharmed. To be honest, I had my doubts when we came here tonight." She could feel herself crashing from the prodigious adrenalin rush, and focused her attention on staying awake until they left.

She hadn't realized she was dozing off until Willie's cry of terror brought her abruptly awake. "No! You keep away!"

The servant shrank against the back of the sofa, staring wild-eyed at Varina, who had gone to peer over Nicholas' shoulder.

"I don't understand--Willie, what's wrong?" she asked, her hand on Nicholas' arm for support.

The handyman grabbed at his neck, screaming wildly about pain and blood.

"What happened to his neck?" she demanded, spying the bandages Nicholas had applied.

"Varina, you mustn't..."

"What happened to his neck?!"

"Don't hurt me, Mrs. Tannek, please, don't do it again," Willie babbled.

Varina's fingers dug into her husband's arm. "*I* did that?! I attacked him?"

"No, no--Varina, it was *not* you, it was Angelique-!" Nicholas drew her away from the frightened man, held her hands, and made her look at him. "Varina, my heart, you did *not* do this!"

"Willie," Barnabas said, laying his hand on the servant's shoulder. "You're safe, I promise it."

"Don't let her get me, Barnabas!"

"Hush, Willie. No one is going to hurt you." Barnabas stared into Willie's

eyes, until the man subsided into an uneasy silence.

"I'm so sorry," Varina wailed, a look of horror on her face. "I didn't mean to do it, Willie--I would *never* do such a thing."

By now Varina was on her way to matching Willie's hysteria, and Nicholas headed it off by saying, "I think it is time we went home, my heart. Tomorrow will find us all in a better frame of mind." He turned to the chair where the Irishwoman was trying not to nod off. "Liara?"

"Perhaps Miss Kelloran should stay here," Barnabas suggested. "I should like to invite you all, but under the circumstances..."

"It would be unwise," Nicholas concurred. "In any event, Varina should rest in her own bed, where her native earth can restore her strength." Glancing at Liara, he added, "But the nearest bed is certainly the best for this lady, if you are certain it will not inconvenience you."

Their host shook his head. "Hardly. After what she has done, it is the least I can offer."

"Well, that seems settled," the lady in question noted blearily, sense of humor still reasonably intact. "Thank you."

After seeing the Tanneks out, Barnabas excused himself to ready a guest room for Liara. A pang of memory pulled at his heart as he took Josette's nightgown from the clothespress in her room, the room where Victoria had spent the night not long ago with no inkling of the horror that had so nearly befallen her.

But there was nothing he could lend the witch that would not stir some painful memory, for the other women's clothing in the house belonged to his mother, or the the unfortunate Millicent--or worst of all, to the angel of Hell who had caused all this grief. In any event, Liara would drown in anything of theirs, while his delicate love had been much the same size.

Upon returning to the parlor, he had expected to find his guest curled up in her chair fast asleep, but instead she was reaching out of her own fatigue to comfort poor terrified Willie. Utterly exhausted, with no magic but a smile and a soft, lilting voice, she knelt by the sofa holding the man's hand and calming him as no spell or vampiric compulsion could have done. In that moment Barnabas saw the simple village healer she must once have been, and wondered what whims of fate had led her to raise her gentle voice to call faceless spirits with an authority that frightened him.

"Here he is, Willie," she said as Barnabas entered the parlor. "Y'see, everythin's right again. 'Twill all look better in the mornin', I promise you."

Covering a twinge of amusement at her loss of control over her accent, Barnabas said sternly, "Off to bed with you, Willie."

"Yessir," Loomis agreed without protest, and shuffled upstairs to obey.

"I'm presumin' that applies to me as well?" Liara asked, still kneeling on the floor.

The vampire offered her a hand up. "Unless, of course, you have some plan to exhaust yourself further. Washing the windows, perhaps?"

Laughing shakily she answered, "No, no. But if I didn't get him calmed down some, I'd never be gettin' any sleep meself. Me shields are shot all to Hell, if ye'll pardon the phrase, and panic's an easy thing to catch."

"Under the circumstances, I am prepared to pardon almost anything." She was leaning heavily on him as they headed for the stairs, and for the first time gave him the impression of vulnerability. She made light of it, but he did not believe she made a habit of draining her resources so totally. He was all but carrying her by the time they reached the guest room, and he left her seated on the edge of the bed with the nightgown in her lap, saying, "I shall be in the parlor. Do not hesitate to call if you need anything."

"Thank you. I'll be fine." Liara glanced at her watch. "Sweet Lady, 'tis only midnight?"

"It has been a long evening, to say the least," Barnabas noted mildly. "Good night, Miss Kelloran."

"G'night," Liara murmured around a yawn. The battle had drained nearly every scrap of her energy and she was half asleep as she undressed and pulled the

borrowed gown on over her head. She was out like a light before her head hit the pillow.

*

"You're very quiet, my heart," Nicholas said as the pair returned to their home.

Varina glanced at him, then shook her head. "I have nothing to say, Nicholas."

"We owe Liara a great debt for all she has done," he said when she returned to silence. "Unfortunately she couldn't end Barnabas' curse, but perhaps he can learn to live with it now that Angelique will no longer be a problem."

"Perhaps."

"Now that Liara has done her job, it will be our turn to help Barnabas. I believe he will learn quickly," Nicholas continued, frustrated by Varina's lack of response.

"*Our* turn? No, your turn," she said, refusing to look at him. "I'm certainly not fit to give him advice. I'm no better than he is."

Nicholas took her by the shoulders and turned her to face him. "What do you mean by that?!"

"I attacked poor Willie! I was no better than a monster, with no thought for him. How can I counsel Barnabas in how to live a moral life when I have behaved as a monster?"

"But Varina, that wasn't you--Angelique was in control," Nicholas tried to reason.

"I should have fought harder. I shouldn't have allowed her to take over," Varina said, lowering her head.

Nicholas' first instinct was to enfold her in his arms, offering her the love and support she so obviously needed. "My heart, it wasn't your fault," he murmured, his lips brushing her forehead. "You mustn't blame yourself..."

"But Barnabas and Willie must blame me," she said. "And hate me." Self-loathing laced her tone.

"Varina--"

"They didn't *see* Angelique, they saw *me*," she interrupted, refusing to listen to reason. "*I* was the one who nearly tore out Willie's throat!"

"Varina--"

"No, Nicholas, *you* talk to Barnabas," she said firmly. "I don't believe I shall see him again before we leave Collinsport."

"He won't understand," Nicholas said. "No one will understand...Varina, I love you! I don't want to see you torment yourself like this." He took her by the shoulders, turning her to face him. "It was *not* your fault, Varina."

She looked up at him, smiling sadly at the expression in his eyes. "Yes it was, Nicholas. But thank you anyway." She touched his cheek, then turned and went up the staircase, not looking back.

"My heart," he whispered, staring after her with distress. Never had he seen her like this, and he was at a loss as to how to handle the situation. Perhaps after a long rest on her native soil her spirit would be revived.

*

It was two o'clock when a piercing scream sent Barnabas racing into the guest room, where he found Liara cowering against a bedpost clutching the covers in one hand and Niamh in the other, shouting hysterically in a language he did not understand.

"Miss Kelloran!" She swung the dagger wildly at the sound of his voice, and he caught hold of her hand to stop her from harming herself. Belatedly he realized that, lacking his night vision, she could probably barely see him, and that he was only adding to her panic and disorientation. Plucking the knife from her hand and taking her firmly by the shoulders, he dropped his voice to a tone of command. "Liara. Stop this. You are safe!" Still she struggled to escape, and

he took her tear-streaked little cat face in both hands, forcing her to look at him. "Liara! Be still!"

With a whimper that twisted his heart, she obeyed, the small fists that had been pummeling his chest dropping limply to her lap. As soon as he was certain the nightmare panic had subsided, he released her, disgusted with himself for bringing his power to bear on his benefactress.

"Barnabas?" She blinked uncertainly, then seemed finally certain of her surroundings. "I'm sorry, I think I've made a fool of myself."

"Hardly that," he assured her, "though I feared far worse than a nightmare. And you are ill-prepared to defend yourself at the moment."

She nodded, admitting softly, "Yes, I am. Even from myself, it seems; it's been many years since that particular face has haunted my dreams."

"Whose face, if I may make so bold?"

"Sigurd Gunnarsen," she spat, "Captain of the brave ship *Lady Sif*. He looked like mighty Thor himself, if such a person existed; he had the face of an angel and the heart of the serpent carved on the *Lady*'s bow. His noble lads burned my village to the ground and took home as slaves those few they felt like sparing." Her cheeks burned at the memory. "The wise woman, she was too dangerous to leave alive, but her daughter..." She allowed herself a short, ugly laugh. "I was fourteen, a virgin, a prize fit for the Captain himself." Her fist clenched convulsively and Barnabas laid a hand over it.

"Enough," he interrupted. "I have no right to hear these things."

She shook her head. "Nor I to burden you with them. I'm sorry; I hadn't intended to embarrass or offend you. I'm afraid my tongue is on a rather long leash tonight."

"No offense taken," Barnabas assured her. "But I should leave you to your rest."

"Wait." The small hand clasped his. "I'm ashamed to say it, but...I'm a bit afraid to be alone right now. Stay and talk to me for a few minutes, until I get myself properly collected?"

"If you wish." Barnabas moved to the edge of the bed, allowing the Irishwoman to settle back against the pillows. He had come to the conclusion that the witch's past was a thing best left alone, and did not encourage her to explain. "Well. As I have it on such authority, I suppose I must accustom myself to the idea that there is hope of a sort for me."

She smiled at that, saying, "You must always have believed that, or you would never have endured all that you have."

"Perhaps I did. Though my hope was always that I could somehow return to what I was."

"We can never go back," she answered gently. "But going forward is seldom as bad as we fear."

Barnabas looked down at the warm little hand twined in his cold one. "I could believe that, but I know that forward there is more of the same, more life stolen from others. I am still not certain anything has really changed."

"Barnabas..."

"No," he interrupted, rising suddenly to go. "We will argue this point when you have regained your strength, and I shall leave you to do so. Good night, Miss Kelloran."

His abrupt, almost nervous departure puzzled Liara, but she was too weary to give it much thought. She settled under the rich down comforter, and was well on her way back to sleep when an unfamiliar voice downstairs snapped her back to alertness.

Almost certainly whoever it was presented no threat, but her frayed nerves would not allow her to sleep until she knew who else was in the house.

Noiselessly she padded down the stairs almost to the landing, crouching behind the banister to observe Barnabas and his companion.

The visitor was a young woman with smoky blue eyes and a voice to match, and it was immediately evident she meant no danger for her host, although Barnabas might not agree with that, Liara reflected with amusement. The stranger possessed a figure she obviously knew how to use and a rich blonde mane tumbled artfully

over one eye, and she was currently making optimal use of all her assets.

For his part, the vampire stolidly ignored her innuendo, asking sternly, "What are you doing here, Carolyn? I did not summon you."

"But you need me," the blonde told him matter-of-factly, calculating that moment to let the wide neck of her sweater slip off one shoulder. Liara shoved down a bubble of laughter at the scenario: the gentleman vampire as the object of seduction by a good-natured 1990s femme fatale. Carolyn might not have started this uneasy relationship, but she evidently had no compunction about continuing it. "I haven't even seen you in almost a week," the young woman pouted, endeavoring to drape herself around the retreating vampire. "You're not getting what you need somewhere else, are you?" Barnabas was visibly uncomfortable, and Carolyn showed no sign of relenting. "Certainly not from Saint Vickie."

Cold anger flashed in Barnabas' dark eyes, and he held her firmly at arm's length. "You will never make such a comment again, is that clear?"

In response, the blonde's pout grew more sullen, but she nodded. "Don't worry, I know she's too good for this--or at least, so you think." A little smile played about her painted lips. "Not that anybody's gotten Vickie's opinion, of course...but as long as you've got handcuffs on my brain, I guess I can't say anything." Taking hold of his hand, she brushed it down her face to the pulse just below her jaw; Liara could practically hear the woman purring. "So for now it looks like I have you all to myself."

"Carolyn, I--"

"You need me, Barnabas," she finished for him. "And I want you, even if you don't trust me to keep quiet on my own. Even if you do use me to spy on people. I really don't like Julia either, did you know that?" She stepped closer, and Barnabas' stern facade began to crack. "I know this isn't forever, but what is? Just give me what you promised when this is done, and we'll call it even."

"You don't know what you're asking," he protested.

Carolyn twirled slowly, wrapping Barnabas' arm about her and leaning her head back against his shoulder, eyes closed. "Oh, yes, I do."

With that, Barnabas' resolve melted, and Liara discreetly withdrew to her room.

*

"Miss Kelloran? Are you feeling better?"

Liara woke up to find Barnabas standing by her bed. Yawning, she stretched and sat up. "Much, thank you," she answered. "Twenty hours sleep can do wonders."

"I hope you're up to handling another crisis," he said, handing her a note. "Nicholas has sent for us."

Raking her tangled hair back from her face, she read the message in Tannek's familiar handwriting. "Lord and Lady," she muttered, "if it's not one thing it's another." She handed the note back, pulling Josette's dressing-gown from the bedpost as she got up. "If there is a more destructive emotion than guilt, I don't want to know what it is."

"Liam also brought fresh clothing for you; I set it over there. And Willie has prepared some sort of supper, I believe. You must be famished."

"Yes, I am. How is Willie today?"

Barnabas frowned. "Much the better for rest and a little time, but still badly shaken. I believe he understands now that Mrs. Tannek is not truly responsible for what happened to him. Yet he is not ready to come with us and face her."

Liara looked at the note again, her gaze thoughtful. "Well now, perhaps he won't have to do that, tonight. Thank you, Barnabas. I'll be ready in a few minutes."

He bowed and turned to leave, saying, "I shall wait for you in the parlor, Miss Kelloran. After you have eaten, we can go to the Tannek house."

As Liara dressed, she silently cursed the witch Angelique for what she had done to the gentle-hearted vampiress. And in harming Varina, she had also harmed Nicholas.

*

Barnabas held her chair for her, then sat across the table to keep her company while she ate her dinner. "Liam waits to drive us to the Tanneks'."

She nodded, shoveling in the stew as rapidly as manners would permit to satisfy her growling stomach. "I have my work cut out for me," she commented between bites, "with all the repercussions of her scheming." With a wry smile, she added, "I suppose now I know where to begin."

"I see." He was silent for a long time, as Liara continued to eat. "What happened to her, Miss Kelloran?"

Liara crossed her knife and fork on her plate. "Her masters collected on the debt she owed them, I think."

He lifted an eyebrow. "May they have joy of it."

Liara smiled and raised her wineglass. "That I'll drink to!" She matched action to word, swallowing the last of the red wine. "Well, shall we go?"

"As you wish," he said gravely, though amusement twinkled in his eyes. "Willie!"

The servant appeared. "Mr. Barnabas?"

"Tell Liam we're ready to go back to the Tanneks' now."

Willie darted an uneasy glance at Liara, then bobbed his head. "Yessir. I'll tell him."

"Thank you, Willie."

By the time the Tanneks' chauffeur had appeared in the foyer, Barnabas had helped Liara on with her coat and was just reaching for his own.

The trio went out of the Old House and crossed the driveway to Liam's car.

*

Nicholas answered the doorbell and admitted his guests. "Liara, I hope you're feeling better now?"

"Yes, much better," she assured him. "But how is Varina?"

Sadness filled his dark eyes. "She refuses to listen to reason, and I am at my wits' end. I have never seen her so downhearted. She believes Angelique has revealed her evil nature and she fears it will surface again. She even refuses to speak with Barnabas, saying she is not fit to advise him."

"Oh, Varina." Liara shook her head. "Well, I have plenty to say about that, but I'll save it for her. I'm sure you've already been saying much the same."

Barnabas hung back. "If she does not wish to see me..."

"Please come with us," Nicholas responded. "It may help to hear from you that she should not blame herself."

"Very well."

"By the standards she's applying to herself," Liara mused, "we're neither of us in any position to counsel her. Perhaps we should start with that."

"Thank you," Nicholas said, leading them into the living room, where Varina sat before the fire, staring at the flames. "We have visitors, my heart."

"You have visitors," she corrected, refusing to look at them.

"No, *you* have visitors, Varina, and you'd best turn around and talk to us." Liara said, her tone sharp.

Varina glanced around, wincing when she saw Barnabas standing behind the Irish witch. Quickly averting her gaze, she turned her back on them again. "There is nothing to say. Other than--I am sorry, Barnabas. How is Willie? Has he recovered?"

"He has," Barnabas assured her; it would not do at this point to mention Loomis' continued refusal to face her. "He was frightened, but little more."

"Because the three of you caught me in time," Varina replied miserably.

"Because we caught *Angelique* in time," Liara corrected. "Nicholas tells us you insist it was your action, not hers, to attack Willie that way. That is not what I saw."

The dark-haired lady hung her head. "You did not see the Varina Tannek you

know, that much is certain."

"Yes, I did. And she was fighting with every ounce of her strength."

"Was I? Obviously it wasn't enough. I might as well have *helped* her. Liara!"

"No," Liara retorted, as she crossed to Varina's chair and knelt before it. "Listen to me, Varina...Angelique's power was extraordinary. If anyone failed in this matter, it was myself, because I didn't foil her first attack."

"But you tried," Varina said, reaching out to her friend. "You defended us all--"

"And *you* tried to fight her possession, Varina," said Liara, clasping her hand. "We all know you would never aid one such as Angelique. You need to admit it to yourself, my friend."

"My heart, I have tried to tell you that you were not at fault," Nicholas said, standing behind her and resting a hand on her shoulder.

"None of you know what it's like to have that evil inside you, possessing you!" Varina declared, pushing his hand away and standing up. "To have it take control, force you to do things that are vile and repulsive..."

"Do we not?" Barnabas interrupted gravely. "I believe I know exactly what it is like."

Varina's hand flew to her mouth. "Oh, Barnabas, I didn't mean--!"

"We know, Varina," Liara told her. "You didn't mean any of it, that's the point. You were upset and frightened and exhausted, and you're condemning yourself for not being perfect." The witch looked away for a moment, saying, "I've done a few things in my time that I'm not proud of." Taking a deep breath, she continued, "I did them, Varina, by my own choice. You know that, and you have never called me evil for it. But here you are damning yourself for this."

"No, no, Liara, I never have considered you evil," Varina protested, emotion sparking in her black eyes. "You must not think of yourself that way, any more than Barnabas."

Barnabas looked startled at the sudden switch. Now *she* was lecturing *them*! "Your pardon, Mrs. Tannek," he said, "but if we are not permitted to think of ourselves as evil, then why should *you* be allowed to do so?"

"Well put, Mr. Collins," Nicholas commented, rubbing his forehead as if it ached. "Varina, it was *not* your fault, you're not evil, and that's an end of the matter."

Varina blinked at the commanding tone of voice. Nicholas seldom was so forceful with her; in fact, he had not been since the days of their beginning when he'd struggled to convince her she was no longer a slave.

"Quite right," Liara agreed with a firm nod of her head. "It was your good heart that Angelique could not control. You fought her, and made it easier for me to deal with her. She could not force you into evil, despite her best efforts. Listen to Nicholas--he knows your heart and soul better than anyone."

Varina's lip trembled and Nicholas gathered her in his arms. "I love you, my heart, no matter what you believe. You could never be evil, and I want you to stop this nonsense. You were as much a victim of Angelique as Barnabas. Have you forgotten why we came to Collinsport? Barnabas needs your gentle touch."

"You have shown me that this curse does not have to destroy my humanity," Barnabas said. "I need not be the monster Angelique created."

"I have been much blessed--a knight with fierce loyalty for a husband, and staunch friends," Varina said at last, eyes shimmering as she looked at the concerned faces. "I don't deserve such love and concern--"

"Enough of that kind of talk! You must forget what happened," Nicholas cut in, tilting her face up to meet his gaze. "I have never forced my will on you, but I shall if it's the only way to return you to your senses."

"--but I value it greatly," she continued, reaching up to touch his cheek.

He smiled and covered her hand with his. "Forgive me, my heart. I spoke too rashly, because of my love for you."

"I do love you, Nicholas," she said softly.

Liara and Barnabas exchanged glances as the knight bent his head and kissed his lady on the lips. Liara thought she detected a trace of wistfulness in the

other vampire's eyes, then he said, "I think I shall return to the Old House now. Thank you, Miss Kelloran, for everything you have done for me. I shall value your friendship, and that of the Tanneks, far more than I can ever express in words."

Liara stretched up to kiss his cheek. "Blessed be, Barnabas Collins. I'm glad to have been able to help you. Now promise me you will let the Tanneks help you make a new life for yourself?"

"I shall try," Barnabas answered gravely.

"As we shall, dear Barnabas," Varina said, taking his hand. "We will not abandon you, for we shall stay here until you are comfortable with your life. I know it's not the ending you had hoped for, but it is the best we can offer. In time you will accept the limitations and rejoice in the advantages. Oh yes, there *are* advantages if you look for them."

"What advantage is there in a life without love?" Barnabas said bitterly.

"You can have love, Mr. Collins," Nicholas said, his hand on Varina's shoulder. "But you must have patience. I waited four centuries for Varina."

"Josette was my only love."

"Was she, then," Liara asked, tilting her head as she looked at him. "What of Victoria Winters?"

"You told us you believed she *was* Josette," Nicholas recalled.

Barnabas glanced down. "I *do* believe it, and once I hoped we had been given another chance, but..." He trailed off, shaking his head.

"You must *never* give up hope, Barnabas," Varina said, touching his hand.

A tiny smile quirked the corner of Barnabas' mouth, as he raised her hand to his lips. "You and Nicholas have already helped me much by showing me there is another path. I cannot change what I am, but I begin to believe I *can* change how I live with it. Thanks to you, Angelique has truly lost."

- The End -



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IN THE BEGINNING

by

Lisa Savignano

The jungle was hot, one hundred twenty degrees hot. Sweat slid down Jean-Pierre's back like an endless river as he hacked his way through the mass of tangled vines and overgrown foliage. Raise the machete, hack through the greenery. Raise and hack, raise and hack.

At first he'd been content to linger behind the natives that were now beside him, watching their muscles move as they cut their way through the endless jungle. Eventually though, he had ached for something more exciting and had asked one of the dark-skinned workers for his machete.

It *had* been exciting at first, cutting the vines and undergrowth, but, as his muscles tired, it was reduced to a few simple motions, performed over and over again. Raise your arm, bring it down with enough force to cut through the vines and small tree trunks, raise and cut, raise and cut. His arm ached and his back ached and sweat poured off him in rivulets, but he refused to give up, refused to admit his weakness.

"Don't you think you've had enough of that, Jean-Pierre?" Professor Charles La Croix asked, tapping his pupil gently on the shoulder.

Oui, Professeur," Jean-Pierre replied, dropping back to hand the native his machete and wipe his own dripping forehead with the back of his arm in one smooth motion. Watching the native fall easily back into line with vigorous cuts at the greenery, he added, "One must admire their endurance."

Professor La Croix shrugged indifferently. "They are like pigs. They know nothing except living in huts like pigs and working for what few pennies they can earn from passing expeditions. What they earn is spent on drink until it is gone. Pigs who look like men. They even eat like pigs."

Jean-Pierre frowned, but was quick not to let his professor see. He found nothing wrong with the way the natives lived, but Professor La Croix would take it as a personal attack if he mentioned it. Although he was a brilliant man admired by all for his work, his attitude toward any humans of less high class or status was legendary. Still, he was a very intelligent man, and it was because there was no one under whom he could learn more that Jean-Pierre had remained with his mentor.

Jean-Pierre thought of the story that had led them to this particular expedition... A sailor had gone exploring with a group of his friends who were amateur archaeologists, and they had discovered a fantastic city in the jungle. They had only stayed one night when one of them had inexplicably disappeared. Frightened by the legends they'd heard of jungle monsters, they had made off with evidence to show they'd been there, and quit the valley.

Unfortunately, they had been stricken by a mysterious jungle disease and only one survived to sail again. The map and the few pieces of evidence had passed from sailor to sailor until Professor La Croix had finally gotten possession of them.

And now they were here, following the map to the valley, braving the heat, the insects, the snakes, and the unhealthy air that pervaded the jungle like mist. Though Jean-Pierre had been anxious to come, now he was wondering why he'd ever

wanted to. It had been two weeks since the last landmark, and since then, there had been nothing. He was beginning to grow discouraged, as much as he hated to admit it.

His *maman* had been so proud when he'd told her he was going to be an archaeologist. Even his two sisters and younger brother had been impressed. Sweet little Tienette, clutching her doll, had offered it to keep him company on the expedition. He laughed guiltily. If he did die here and they opened his baggage, what would they think of the porcelain doll in the blue satin dress?

Just then, the natives stopped. One of them pointed to something half-buried in the leaf mold of the jungle floor. It was a human skull.

"Wonderful!" Professor La Croix called as he looked at the body with a practiced eye. "We shall stop here for the night." He called Jean-Pierre over and checked the map. "Here, you see?" He indicated a section with three crosses drawn on it, one after the other. "We must be here."

"How can you tell?" Jean-pierre asked, pointing out the spot on the map Professor La Croix indicated. "There are three crosses here and only one body. We are not even sure the body is from a white man.

"It's too big to be a native's skull," the Professor replied, hefting the bones experimentally. "White men have more intelligence, so their skulls are larger."

"Besides," he said off-handedly, "Next to the body, I found *this*." He opened his hand with a flourish. In it rested a jade oblong carved with the head of a grinning monster with abnormally sized canines. He held it up to the top of the map, where a similar face was crudely drawn in ink. "They are identical."

"Now," the Professor turned to address the leader of the natives. The man seemed to know quite a few words of execrable French. "Set up camp and bury the body."

The native smiled, revealing teeth filed to points. *"Oui, oui,"* he chanted, nodding his head. But his accent was so bad it sounded like "Ve, Ve," instead. He addressed the other natives in a liquid flow of syllables and they scrambled to obey.

Meanwhile, La Croix continued to probe at the body, clearing away refuse with the tips of his fingers and a large, soft brush he had taken from his vest pocket. He picked up a crumbled bit of stone and showed it to Jean-Pierre, who'd dropped to his knees beside him.

"Damaged, the professor said disparagingly. "Oafs. They should have been more careful with the chisel." He rummaged around a bit and finally gave up. "Nothing else. A very poor bunch of archaeologists to have taken so little. Frightened off by fairy stories. Pfag!" La Croix's dark eyes flashed menacingly. "I suppose they meant to come back." He sagged backwards and closed his eyes. When he opened them, he was smiling once more. "Ah well, all the more for us to find, yes?"

"You have found something?" The voice was female, deep and husky. Her French was of the lower class, but its timbre was such that one would never notice. The woman possessing the voice was of medium height, with a rounded, sensual face. Her body was a mass of intersecting curves, and she moved with feline grace. Her long, dark hair was bound back from her face with a limp ribbon, while a few loose strands were plastered to her forehead by sweat.

"Yes, *cherie*, come and see." La Croix rose to his feet and offered both the jade oblong and the stone piece to her.

"Mmn. Very intriguing." Her accent made the words sound almost exotic.

Jean-Pierre wondered why Professor La Croix had consented to let Ghislaine come along. Almost everyone at the *Universite* knew she was Professor La Croix's mistress, for she never let anyone forget it. She had apparently persuaded him to let her come along, and Jean-Pierre knew better than to broach the subject. Perhaps she had been afraid he would forget her while he was in the Americas. She hadn't wasted any time on that matter, either. Instead of the garments she'd bought for the trip, she was attired in a gaudy skirt of cotton and white lace-up shirt she'd bought in their first port of call. The shirt was open almost to the middle of her chest and her sweat had made it nearly transparent. He could even

see the smears on the shirt from where the rouge on her nipples had bled in the heat. Even now, he could see dots of perspiration on her breasts tremble as Professor La Croix caressed her.

He let his eyes slide away. What was between them was none of his business, although he knew that had the entire expedition suddenly wanted her, she would have laid back and enjoyed the whole thing, just like the whore she was.

He walked away, passing the natives to rest against the moss-covered bark of a massive tree. A slightly plump man, bearded, and dressed in a rumpled khaki shirt and pants, rushed up from the back of the string of natives. He smiled absent-mindedly at Jean-Pierre. "Has the professor found something?"

"Besides Ghislaine, you mean?" Jean-Pierre smiled bitterly. "Yes, a jade axe head and a bit of stone."

Bertrand looked at Jean-Pierre. "I agree such a woman should not be here..."

"But what can we do about it? Nothing. It was Professor La Croix's decision."

"You say he found something?"

"Yes, an axe head with the strange face we saw on the map carved into it, and a carving of the god of death." They both looked up as Ghislaine moaned. Disgusted, Jean-Pierre got up and stalked off, Bertrand close behind him.

Two weeks later, they found the city. One of the natives wielding a machete had chopped into the wall of growth and hit stone. When the vines were cleared away, they could see it was an entire structure. In fact, there were more vine-covered masses all around them. If not for the chance blow, they might have passed the city and never known it.

Professor La Croix gave orders to immediately set up camp while he, Jean-Pierre, and Bertrand examined the carvings. The stone blocks in the structure were covered with men in strange costumes taking captives, cutting out hearts, fighting in battles, and undergoing incomprehensible ceremonies.

Next to each figure were a series of dots, bars, and animals, revealing the name of the figure, be it 2 Jaguar or 15 Snake.

They cleared off more of the vines covering the wall and revealed a section detailing the life of a warrior named 6 Ocelot Jade Axe in the cult of gods, each distinguished by the long canines coming from his partly open mouth. Youths stripped the warrior and cleansed him in a sacred bath. He was led to a flat rock, where he was bound to the stone, presumably to prevent him from struggling. Next, using a series of knives and their own teeth, the "gods" dissected 6 Ocelot and drank his blood. The final scene showed 6 Ocelot whole once more and now possessed of the same canines as the "gods".

Jean-Pierre watched as Bertrand sketched furiously, wanting to see it all committed to paper before the light gave out.

"Who do you think these gods are, *Professeur?* Some kind of high priests?" Bertrand caught sight of the breasts on one of the figures and added, "and priestesses?"

La Croix stroked his chin, leaning closer to the stone wall. "If the figures were all male, I'd say it was some sort of warrior society. As it stands, it's probably a sort of willing sacrifice, such as among the druids of England. Even though this warrior is tied down, his expression is serene. They may have tied him because the cuts had to be made perfectly straight and preventing any kind of involuntary motion through the victim's death throes was a necessity."

He tapped the last panel. "Here, 6 Ocelot seems to be with the other gods, probably in some sort of heaven, since he is whole again. It seems to be some kind of propitiation in which the victim, through his suffering, becomes a god as well."

"And the blood drinking?" prompted Bertrand, leaning forward to study the carvings more closely.

La Croix watched the natives set up camp with his lip curled slightly. "Real. I've no doubt they actually did drink the man's blood, as priests acting for their gods."

They came to the edge of the building and hacked away growth from the new side, revealing an opening into the rock. La Croix smiled and gestured to Jean-

Pierre. "Will you go, or shall I?"

"I'll go. I only need a torch." He lit a lantern that Bertrand grabbed from the pile of baggage, and the oil within sloshed reassuringly. The building wasn't very large and the receptacle was almost full.

Turning up the lantern and thrusting it before him, he squeezed into the narrow opening and waved the lantern around. Thousands of eyes glowed back at him in the dark, accompanied by dry rattling and hissing noises. He felt something slither over his boot and saw a scaled coil, larger around than his thigh. Backing quickly out, he wiped sweat from his forehead.

"Perhaps we should leave off the exploring until tomorrow, eh?" La Croix said, with a wry smirk.

"Oui, professeur."

The next day, the building evicted of its former occupants, they entered to find an altar with several objects atop it. Jean-Pierre turned them over carefully with the tips of his fingers. The clay figurines were fashioned in the shape of men. When he righted them in approximately their original positions, they stood around a slight depression in the altar, in which was carved another male figure, cut into pieces in the same manner as the carvings on the wall.

The figures were made with unsmiling lips and jutting canines. The carved victim's face was uncaring, even peaceful, in repose. There was what appeared to be a crack in the rock of the altar, but when he lifted the lantern higher, he could see it was meant to be some sort of slash or cut in the throat and breast of the victim.

In the trash left on the floor, they found what might once have been a stool, and some pot sherds. Ghislaine, who had been searching the rotting mass carefully, showed them to La Croix with a smile on her sweaty face.

He received them with a returning smile and kiss and she went back to work, throwing the mass out the door when she was sure it was empty.

Bertrand leaned against one of the damp walls, busy with his sketchbook and pen until the drawings took on the reality of life.

They worked until the sun was almost completely down. Four buildings were entirely exposed now, the stone facades catching the fading rays of the sun as they had not for a thousand years or more. Bertrand was busy even now, straining his eyes against the fading light to make out the timeworn carvings that covered the stone.

"We'll stop now," La Croix told him, clapping the stout man on the shoulder. Bertrand started and glared at the wavy line that had resulted as if it personally offended him.

"Oui, Professeur," he said, a trifle unhappily.

Jean-Pierre grinned as Bertrand closed the sketchbook. "You would have sun twenty-four hours a day so you could draw, wouldn't you, Bertrand?"

Bertrand's gaze took in the whole city at a sweep. "I wish I did have more time. I will never finish the drawings."

"Paris wasn't built in a day, *mon ami*. A man could be here forever and not finish. You must remember that."

Bertrand's eloquent look said that while he might remember it, he didn't have to like it. He breathed deeply, taking in the rich scents of cooking food, and a smile grew over his face. "I may be cross, but a good meal will do much to fix that."

Laughing, the two men set off to the cook tent to eat. They separated afterwards, agreeing to meet later to discuss the religious practices in the city.

About nine, Jean-Pierre lit the lantern in the cook tent. He'd been writing letters to his family and had quite forgotten the time. He had expected Bertrand to be there already and was surprised to find he was not.

Twenty minutes later, he went to Bertrand's tent, only to find it empty, the sketchbook lying discarded on the cot's pillow. The lantern was out and the well still sounded half full. The glass was cool, meaning he had not been there recently.

Twenty minutes after that, he had made a thorough search of the camp. The

workmen were in simple straw huts they had built, and both his and Bertrand's tents were empty, as was the cook tent and the tent covering their stores. The noises coming from La Croix's tent made him sure Bertrand wasn't in there. He was gone, and the sounds of the jungle animals made Jean-Pierre all too aware that time was of the essence in finding his friend.

He rang the cook's beater and was gratified to see the natives run out of their huts. La Croix appeared out of his tent, struggling to put on his pants and run at the same time, with Ghislaine behind him, a sheet sufficing as covering. "I trust you have good reason for this commotion, Jean-Pierre!" La Croix's voice seethed with anger.

"Oui, Professeur," Jean-Pierre told him soberly. "Bertrand is missing."

They formed the natives into groups to search the jungle. Though they searched long and hard, they could find no sign of Bertrand. Reluctantly, they finally gave up, assuming he had been carried off by a wild animal while he walked in the jungle.

When the morning came, everyone was depressed. The natives looked dark and suspicious. Jean-Pierre felt he was to blame for not acting sooner. Ghislaine was uncharacteristically silent and even La Croix spoke in monosyllables.

The meal was eaten in silence, and they dispersed to start work for the day. The natives went to clear a huge pyramid in the upper right corner of the city. They had been hacking away at the undergrowth surrounding it for days now, and out of the ghostly mist rose a series of broad stone steps that were capped with a green shroud of vines and leaves.

Only today there was something different: A peach splotch at the top of the pyramid. Jean-Pierre found himself climbing the ruined structure along with the natives, who were calling to each other with voices like bird song and the hooting of owls as they hacked their way past the greenery that blocked their way.

At last the peach was tinged with beige...and red. For a moment, Jean-Pierre was afraid Bertrand was dead, and that this was just his body. But no, he saw Bertrand move slowly, as if in sleep.

Soon, he ascended to the top of the pyramid and crossed to where Bertrand lay, stretched out on a slab of chiseled stone. The vines about him were ripped and torn, as if snapped by brute force. Judging by the diameter of the shoots, however, he would not be willing to put his own strength to the test.

Bertrand lay with eyes closed, like a corpse in a coffin or some effigy in flesh-colored stone. The steady rise and fall of his chest gave lie to that analogy, however. His usually clean khaki pants and shirt were spattered with blood. It was already dry in most places, but still gleamed with the red of freshness in others.

Close beside Bertrand, on the stone of the altar, lay two objects. One was a jungle bird, neatly plucked, with its guts tidily strung out and bloodless. The other was an obsidian knife, the blade thickly crusted with blood.

The natives went silent at the sight of these and began to mutter amongst themselves. Jean-Pierre ignored them and laid a gentle hand on Bertrand's arm.

Bertrand started and opened his brown eyes. "Good morning, my friend," he said, stroking his beard. "I'm sorry I didn't make our meeting. I fell asleep." He stretched hugely. "By God, this cot is uncomfortable. And where is my tent?" He sat up abruptly. "How did I get up here?"

"I was hoping you could tell me that."

"You mean I've been up here all night?" Bertrand looked down and grimaced. "And what has happened to my clothes? I look as though I have been bathing in an abattoir."

"We do not know. You disappeared last night, and we didn't find you until just a few moments ago."

"All I remember is falling asleep and then waking up here. Although..." his words trailed off uncertainly.

"What is it?"

"I remember a dream. A native woman. No, make that a nightmare. She was dirty and filthy, but so beautiful. I would have done anything for her. I had

this feeling that everything I had been looking for in my life was there, in her. Do you know what I mean?"

Jean-Pierre shrugged helplessly.

Bertrand grinned. "Ah well, you'll learn. I felt that way about my ex-wife. You'll feel it too, when you fall in love." His regard turned inward once again. "This woman, she..." he broke off and looked at Jean-Pierre. "You are too young for such things. She was very beautiful."

Jean-Pierre ducked his head once. "Come," he urged. "We'd better get down from here. I'm sure Professor La Croix would like to speak to you." He picked up the knife. "I'd better take this as well. As for this..." He picked up the bird gingerly, between his thumb and forefinger, and threw it as far as he was able into the encroaching jungle. The natives gave him awed looks, muttering in bird-like tones between themselves as they followed the two foreigners down the broad stone steps of the pyramid.

The rest of the day progressed as usual. Bertrand changed into clothes that were just as rumpled as the filthy ones he'd removed, and submitted to a questioning by La Croix that reminded Jean-Pierre of the Inquisition. He then went back to work with sketchbook and pen, seating himself on a partly crumbled stone wall to sketch the figures carved into the bricks.

Surreptitiously, La Croix made arrangements to have Bertrand's tent guarded by two burly natives. He would have no repeat of the preceding night and the associated furor.

All day, Bertrand worked steadily with his sketchbook, filling it's pages with pictures of warriors, demons, and gods of the ancient culture. He finally quit at dinner, letting his fingers linger over the precise lines of his drawings.

Later still, he excused himself and went to his tent. Jean-Pierre kept an eye on the tent until the natives arrived and then went to share some fine French brandy with Professor La Croix.

La Croix was smoking his pipe near the edge of camp, leaning against the thick bole of a tree and peering out into the jungle with an abstracted look on the fine lines of his face. He chewed on the stem of his pipe and accepted the flask of brandy Jean-Pierre handed him with a grunt. Taking a long pull from the flask, he closed his eyes in pleasure. At last, he sighed and wiped his mouth. "Ah, that's good."

Jean-Pierre drank down a long swallow, letting the brandy burn slowly down to his stomach. Pausing to wipe his mouth, he said, "I am worried about Bertrand."

La Croix bit down on his pipe. "As am I, Jean-Pierre, as am I." He puffed at his pipe, exhaling a cloud of fragrant smoke. "He may walk off again, and that is why I have posted the guards at his tent. If he falls into a walking sleep, they will prevent him from hurting himself."

"I think it was more than simple sleepwalking, sir."

"Oh?"

"That he could have sleepwalked out of his tent and into the jungle without anyone seeing him I can accept. That he got up the cleared section of the pyramid I can also accept. But how did he get past the vines the natives and I had to cut to get through? And the vines covering the altar. They were ripped apart. Not cut or burned, ripped. No one here has that sort of strength, much less Bertrand."

La Croix nodded to show he understood, puffing furiously on his pipe.

"Then there is the matter of the things we found on the slab. I have not seen that knife ever before. Bertrand would have shown us the knife if he'd found it and it couldn't have been on the pyramid more than a day. The rains would have washed it clean. Also, the bird. It was freshly dead. It wasn't shot, and that is the only way to catch one of those filthy things. How did it get there?"

"I cannot explain these things."

"Nor can I or Bertrand. We must be on our guard."

"Perhaps we should visit our patient, Jean-Pierre. Just to see he is all right." Casting one last look at the moonlit jungle, La Croix headed back towards the center of camp.

The natives were stationed at the entrance to Bertrand's tent, but one glance confirmed that Bertrand was not inside. La Croix had just gone to alert the other natives, when Jean-Pierre saw a stealthy figure slipping towards the edge of camp.

Bertrand ignored Jean-Pierre's calls, sticking to the shadows as he made his way towards the jungle. His body moved with a fluid grace that Jean-Pierre could have sworn Bertrand never possessed, and his normally pleasant and open face was drawn into a look of secretive amusement mixed with determination.

Jean-Pierre ran across to where Bertrand was, and the other man turned at the sound. The amusement in his face died and he began to run. Jean-Pierre caught his arm and Bertrand spun to face him, hissing like an angry cat. Caught off-guard, Jean-Pierre let go his grip. Bertrand turned and ran for the forest, only to crumple to the ground as Jean-Pierre tackled his legs.

The smell of leaf mold was thick in Jean-Pierre's nostrils as he fought to keep control over Bertrand's flailing limbs without sustaining any injury in the process. Although Bertrand was strong, Jean-Pierre was the more agile and soon Bertrand struggled futilely to get out of a full nelson. With his legs pinned to the ground by Jean-Pierre's weight, Bertrand could only dig at the layers of rotting leaves on the ground with the tips of his shoes.

Jean-Pierre got his breath back and found that the roaring in his ears was not merely blood from the fight. From the jungle came a bloodcurdling wail, a resounding mix of animal and human that made the hairs on the back of his neck rise. The tops of some trees further back in the jungle shook as the roars mingled with the sound of splintering wood.

A group of natives ran up with a length of rope, and, with Jean-Pierre's help, tied Bertrand securely. Jean-Pierre helped them pick up Bertrand, tied up like a log of firewood in complicated native knots, and carry him off to the tent. Bertrand struggled and kicked, but restrained as he was, he could barely move. Still, his body fairly vibrated with rage. He hissed, sounding like the steam on a boiling pot.

Finally, he broke into words, his voice deep and rasping. "She will make you pay for this. I am hers. Nothing can deny the bonds of blood. Nothing."

The natives continued to walk and Jean-Pierre nearly stumbled in his efforts to keep up. They couldn't understand what Bertrand was saying, even if he could.

"Who is 'she', Bertrand?" he asked, keeping his voice even, his words light and soothing.

"She? She is the beautiful one, goddess of passion. She draws and draws in kisses of velvet fire and her lips swim with crimson longing." His words became indistinct as he raved on, becoming a mumble and ending as a shriek.

"You must let her... I am hers. She needs me. Needs me..." He broke off into another howl as Jean-Pierre and the natives brought him to his brightly lit tent.

"No! No! The light hurts! It claws! The pain!" His body twisted within the confines of the ropes, but to no avail. He bit furiously at the ropes, but could not free himself. The natives tied the cocoon of rope to the bed and left. Ghislaine came in cautiously, looking at the raving man with something akin to sympathy in her eyes.

"He is very sick?"

Jean-Pierre's eyes traveled up and down her body once, taking in the thin batiste nightgown that clung to her like a second skin, revealing her body in sections of light and shadow. "Yes. Very sick." He touched Bertrand's head and the heat of the skin seared Jean-Pierre's hand. "Find me something to wipe him down with. If his fever isn't brought down soon, he might die."

"Will this do?" she asked, thrusting a small bottle of water and a cloth into his hands.

"It will do for now. Send a native for some water."

She left to do his bidding. He drenched the cloth with the water and touched it to Bertrand's skin. As the wetness touched him, Bertrand breathed a deep sigh, the tension flowing out of his body. Jean-Pierre bathed his face and upper chest.

As he unbuttoned Bertrand's shirt, he found a wound on his chest, near the heart. A thin line scored Bertrand's skin. It looked fairly shallow, and when

Jean-Pierre ran the cooling cloth over it. Bertrand relaxed still more, his lips stopping their delirious mumbling. He closed his eyes, and within seconds, his breathing had relaxed into the rhythm of sleep.

Jean-Pierre touched Bertrand's forehead with the back of his hand. His skin was cool now, tinged with a faint, waxy pallor. Jean-Pierre's brow furrowed in puzzlement as he recapped the bottle and left the wet cloth on the folding table. It was very strange. How could Bertrand's temperature have changed so completely in just a few short minutes? He shook his head and left the tent, meeting Ghislaine as she struggled with an unwieldy basin of water.

"Why are you out here?" she asked. "Shouldn't you be inside, tending to your friend?"

"I used the cloth and his temperature came down immediately. It is not natural for something like that to happen. I am very worried."

"You mean I went all that way for nothing!?" Ghislaine nearly dropped the basin.

"No. Go inside and keep an eye on him. If he becomes feverish again, use the water to bathe his head and shoulders." He looked around. "Where is Professor La Croix?"

"I don't know." she said, her words short with annoyance. "I haven't seen him since he went to meet you."

"But he came this way to get help for Bertrand."

"I *haven't* seen him. Ask the monkey men." She tossed her hair and stomped into the tent, nearly losing the water basin in the process.

But the natives had not seen him either. And he was nowhere in camp. After an hour of diligent searching, he was about to call for the natives to beat the jungle, when he saw La Croix step into camp, a satiated and satisfied smile on his face.

"Professor! Where have you been? I've been looking for you everywhere!" Realizing he sounded like a fishwife, Jean-Pierre fell silent as La Croix opened his mouth.

"I took a relaxing walk in the jungle. It was so beautiful out tonight I felt I really should." La Croix puffed on his pipe, only to find it had gone out. As he searched his pockets for a match, Jean-Pierre protested.

"But Bertrand...you were going for help."

A strange look crossed La Croix's face. "Yes, I was, wasn't I?" He struck the match, his face now unreadable. He puffed on the pipe several times and let the smoke drift up to wreath his face. "Good night, Jean-Pierre."

"But Professor...those cries. Didn't you hear them?"

Another strange look crossed La Croix's face. "I remember hearing something crashing in the forest, but whatever it was never came near me." He sighed. "Jean-Pierre, I am tired. I am going to sleep. It would be best if you did the same. I will see you in the morning." He moved away, still puffing on the pipe.

"Yes, Professor." Jean-Pierre moved away, sensing La Croix would say no more on the matter.

The next day, Professor La Croix hurried them all through breakfast. Bertrand, while appearing pale and drained, was back to his normal genial self. Ghislaine looked very dissatisfied and La Croix concentrated only on the food before him, muttering to himself in between forkfuls of eggs and sips of coffee.

When it was over, he hurried them out to the city, indicating five buildings, saying he wanted them cleared and catalogued by the end of the day. Jean-Pierre helped Ghislaine sift through piles of animal bones, coming up with only a few painted stone beads and a small gold trinket for their troubles. When Ghislaine looked into the tallest building, her face went ash-white, then green. Making an abrupt about-face, she fled for the jungle.

Jean-Pierre watched her go and then poked his torch, and his head, into the close confines of the building. Thousands upon thousands of rotting bird and animal corpses, their throats torn out, filled the room to a depth of at least four feet. The skins were alive with maggots and flies, appearing to writhe under their own power. The stench of rot assailed his senses and he found himself

gagging. Taking a few steps backwards, he drew in lungfuls of clean, fresh air. Moving on to the next ruined building, he found it exactly the same, corpses piled in festering mounds against the mold-covered walls. The bodies were in a more advanced state of decay than in the other building, but exactly the same otherwise. As Ghislaine came to help him, he waved her off, fighting the attack of nausea with an arm over his stomach.

"Stay back," he warned her. "It's more of the same."

Looking grateful, she drew him away and rubbed his neck until the nausea abated. "Thank you," he said, smiling at her.

She flashed him a gamin grin, still a little green at the edges herself. "My *grandmere*'s remedy for what ails you. It always works." Then her grin changed, became a little jaded. "I know a better cure for when we are alone."

"No," he told her curtly. This was useless. Every time he tried to be nice to her, she was only interested in bedding him.

"What is the meaning for this delay?" Professor La Croix stared malevolently at both of them, his arms crossed and face set.

"We...," Ghislaine began, but La Croix waved her to silence.

"No, I want to hear it from him," La Croix informed her. "I shall deal with you, *my dear*, later."

"More animal skeletons," Jean-Pierre informed his mentor. "They are rotting, and the air is very...thick. When we went in, we were overwhelmed by the bad air."

La Croix nodded once. "I'll get the natives on clearing them immediately. Once you have *recovered*," his voice dripped scorn, "you can help Bertrand." He turned his turned his penetrating gaze on Ghislaine. "*You* will come with me. I have a task for you." He grabbed her by one hand and jerked her away.

She didn't resist, but her face went horribly blank. Then, it changed and a jaded smile replaced her confusion as she followed him away.

Bertrand, rumpled as usual, was reproducing a drawing from the side of a small building. He squinted as he studied the faded and weather-worn lines in the rock, but his hand was fine and sure as he reproduced those lines faithfully on paper. The drawing, barely visible on the rock, became clear as day on the paper.

"Good afternoon, Jean-Pierre," Bertrand said, his hands still moving effortlessly as he glanced up from his work. "Did Professor La Croix yell at you as well?"

"So, you noticed the change in his temper." Jean Pierre said, beginning to pick up the finished drawings Bertrand had made and stack them into a neat pile. "He is convinced there is a great treasure to be found in these ruins."

"Treasure? These ruins are a treasure in themselves. How much they tell about the peoples who were here before!"

"No. Money treasure. There is much money to be made in selling artifacts, you know. My uncle has a large collection of antiquities stolen from tombs and cities the world over. I tried to convince him it was wrong, but he views it as his personal route to immortality, having his name live on in a museum collection."

"You think the Professor would sell the things he finds here?" Jean-Pierre found that hard to believe. La Croix was a civilized man. Only criminals did such things.

"It is not unknown for things to go missing on expeditions and later wind up elsewhere. I am not saying La Croix would do such a thing, but something has him excited. He mentioned gold, a gold book."

"Why are you telling me this? I could be stealing things myself, if such things are possible."

"No." Bertrand stopped drawing, his eyes fixed on Jean-Pierre. "You are the only person in this whole expedition I trust. I know you would do no such thing. You are too innocent, Jean-Pierre, to the way of the world. Nothing in this world is as it seems. Nothing."

Abruptly, the fire that had been in Bertrand's eyes guttered, and he lowered his head. "You should have traveled more. You have too much faith. The world

laughs at faith, my friend, and I wish I'd had someone to tell me that when I was your age."

There was a loud commotion from one of the buildings Jean-Pierre had discovered the animal corpses in. He rushed to the scene to find several natives babbling wildly in their own tongue.

The leader turned on him and continued speaking quickly, but slowed down when he saw Jean-Pierre didn't understand. "We find!" he exclaimed with a face-wide smile.

Jean-Pierre lit a torch and once again peered into the crumbling ruin of the building. The natives had uncovered a crude stone altar, and on it lay an oblong rust-colored object encrusted with animal gore and entrails. Close beside it stood a simple cup, also well-encrusted with blood and rotting bits of flesh.

Reverently, Jean-Pierre picked up the object and wiped away the crusted gore with the tail of his shirt. It shone with the gleam of burnished gold.

Cradling the book (for he supposed it was the book Bertrand had been speaking of) against his chest, he picked up the cup with the same hand and made his way back to the door.

Professor La Croix came running up, tucking his shirt into the waistband of his pants. "What is it? What have you found?" he demanded.

Wordlessly, Jean-Pierre handed the book to his mentor. La Croix took it reverently. He rubbed at the encrusted filth with his fingers, but gave up quickly when it was apparent it was doing no good. He opened the book. Even the pages were of thinly beaten gold, little thicker than ordinary paper. Incised on the pages were endless arrays of figures, animals and objects. La Croix ran his hand gently over the smooth gold before shutting the book and embracing it to his chest, his face transcendent. He stayed that way for several minutes, but finally relaxed. Opening his eyes, he stared at Jean-Pierre. "What else do you have there?"

"A cup. It was by the book." Jean-Pierre said, holding out the cup.

"Only one? Where is the other?" La Croix, suddenly furious, glared at Jean-Pierre.

"There was only one. They were on an altar, surrounded by animal remains. Why do you think there should be two?"

La Croix shifted his gaze to the natives. "They stole it. Thieving dogs. I will punish them for this, I promise you." Still clutching the book to his chest, he glared at the natives and stalked away.

Jean-Pierre brought the cup with him to dinner and sat with it afterwards, cleaning it with a bit of cloth and some water. He found it puzzling that the inside of the cup was just as gore-splattered as the outside.

La Croix was performing a similar operation with the golden book, allowing no one to touch it but himself. He stroked the gold with the wet cloth while Bertrand sketched some minor artifacts and Ghislaine tried to reassemble pot sherds.

Bertrand drew one last line and surveyed his work before putting the stone figurine aside. Stroking his beard, he frowned. "I am troubled by what we are finding, professor. Why are there so many animal bodies? Could some kind of wild animal lair be in the city? I've heard screams from the jungle at night and they sound very fierce. They sound like a woman, but I've heard many wild animals sound almost human."

La Croix coaxed away some crusted blood and observed his handiwork before replying. "I am not sure. We have never seen an animal in the city. I am sure, however, that the animal bodies were left there by the remains of a blood cult that existed in the city from the time of the city's fall. It is a survival of the god cult we see so vividly depicted on the building walls. I think the local natives killed the animals and drank their blood. I would expect no less of them." He dabbed at the cover once again. "Filthy creatures."

Bertrand tried again. "But these skeletons. Some of them are so old. A cult could never survive that long. And why did they not leave the animal bodies to rot in the jungle? I think some wild beast makes its lair in the buildings.

and when one lair becomes too filthy, it simply moves on to another building."

La Croix leaned back in his chair and massaged the bridge of his nose. He sighed and resumed his upright position. "Any animal would eat the flesh. The animals that rot are merely bloodless. Any cult may survive when it is religious. Christianity started as a cult and has survived for more than 2000 years." La Croix grinned, as though scenting victory.

"That is true." Bertrand's voice was carefully neutral as he picked up another artifact and began to draw.

La Croix grinned even wider, knowing Bertrand would say no more. He caressed a last bit of blood from the gold cover, and a wash of golden reflections spread over his features as he coaxed the book open, revealing a highly-polished golden page inscribed with pictographs. He ran his hand lightly over the page and reached for something that wasn't there with his other hand. He frowned as his hand encountered empty space, then turned. "My notebook!" he exclaimed, closing the massive codex. "I must have left it in my tent. I shall be in my tent," he mumbled, hugging the book to his chest and making his way to the entrance of the cook tent.

"Shall I come and join you?" Ghislaine asked, her voice husky with promise.

La Croix's face registered annoyance. "No. I shall need some time to myself. Do not bother me." He continued walking and disappeared into the night.

Ghislaine made a small *moué* of distaste with her mouth. "Bones and stones. That is all he has time for nowadays."

"It is his first love," Bertrand remarked. "Surely you did not expect it to be any different than it is now?"

"He's changed. He acts different. I do not know how to act around him any more." Ghislaine picked at the sleeve of her blouse. "He barely talks to me any more. All his time is taken up with that stupid book!" her eyes flashed. "I'd throw it away in the jungle if I could!" She cursed briefly and fluently, her eyes fixed on the tent flap.

Slowly, her eyes wandered over to Bertrand, who was drawing a jade axe head, his entire body intent on the task. "You know, if you are finished, we could find a way to amuse ourselves, Bertrand." She stretched out his name like a caress.

He looked up, his face stony. "Sorry, my dear, I have an aversion to disease."

"Cochon!" she snapped, flashing a rude gesture his way and hurrying out into the night, her hips swaying back and forth like semaphore flags as she went.

The two men shared a wordless look. Finally, Jean-Pierre spoke. "The Professor is sending a native back to the coast with mail and packages the day after tomorrow. You should finish your mail if you wish it to be sent."

Bertrand nodded assent. "I would like to take some pictures tomorrow with the photographic plates I've brought. I would appreciate your help."

"Of course," Jean-Pierre said, with a rakish grin. "What are going to photograph?"

"I plan to take pictures of the side of building A and the pyramid, of course..."

They worked out the plans for the plates for quite a while. It wasn't until after, when Jean-Pierre was watching Bertrand draw the cup, that Ghislaine came back.

"Charles is gone!" she said, throwing her hair back with an almost audible snap.

"Are you sure?" Jean-Pierre asked calmly.

A red flush shaded her features. "Of course I am sure! I searched for him everywhere. Didn't you think I'd make sure before coming here?" She glared at both men and stamped her foot. "He is gone, I tell you!" Her face became even redder. "Or is it only on a man's word you will believe someone is gone?"

Bertrand and Jean-Pierre shared another quick glance. They pushed away from the table and searched the tents, only to see that Ghislaine was right. La Croix *was* gone. They looked again, much more carefully this time. Ghislaine stood by the cook tent, arms crossed in front of her, a satisfied smirk on her face. "Are you convinced?" she called, her voice indignant and gleeful all at once. "Do you

believe me now?"

"Who is missing, *cherie*? Has Bertrand walked off again?" The cold, amused voice came from the edge of camp. La Croix, his eyes glittering like cut stones, stood there, looking over everyone.

"Charles!" Ghislaine ran to La Croix and threw her arms about him like a child. He looked down at her, observing her coldly for long moments before he returned the gesture with an odd reluctance.

Bertrand snorted contemptuously and waved a good-night to Jean-Pierre, heading for his tent with his drawings tucked under one arm. Jean-Pierre nodded his head in return and continued to watch the couple silently.

Ghislaine scolded La Croix in her inimitable gutter whine that raised the hairs on the back of Jean-Pierre's neck. La Croix listened with obvious, growing impatience, head cocked to one side. Finally, he seemed to notice Jean-Pierre watching him and shooed Ghislaine into the tent they shared with a curt, "I will join you later." She muttered something under her breath and disappeared inside.

"She was right, you were gone." Jean-Pierre's voice was neutral.

"Was I?" La Croix smiled coldly. "I was merely taking a walk through the city. It is quite beautiful at night."

"You should not go beyond the camp at night. If you get lost, you could be lost forever, and death by the wild animals in the jungle would not be pleasant."

"Concern? For me?" La Croix laughed, a short, harsh bark of mirth. "Why Jean-Pierre, I didn't know you cared." Sarcasm hung heavy in his mentor's voice.

"You are bleeding," Jean-Pierre said, pointing to a shallow, open cut on La Croix's chest that oozed blood sluggishly.

La Croix didn't even blink or look down. "A thorn vine. I brushed against it and got this for my pains." Life and animation returned to La Croix's body and voice.

Jean-Pierre didn't trust himself to reply, nodding stiffly. "It is not safe in the jungle, Professor. It would not be wise to so alarm us once again. With Bertrand's disappearance on everyone's minds, it would better if you remained in camp."

"Yes, it would." A vulpine smile chased its way across La Croix's lips. Nodding once to Jean-Pierre, he made his way to his tent.

Bertrand took the pictures the next morning, using the camera he had carefully packed for the purpose. Unable to bring his developing equipment with him, he sealed the plates in a dark box when he was done with them, carefully lashing the box together and making sure, with black velvet padding, that the plates would stay both secure *and* undeveloped.

Meanwhile, he grumbled to Jean-Pierre about the disappearance of two native workers, discovered only that morning. "It is bad luck when the natives start to desert an expedition. Like rats from a ship, they know when something is wrong."

"La Croix said it was no great loss; he can hire more men. The others thought they were a pair of thieves and liars anyway." Jean-Pierre hacked at the undergrowth around the monument, a giant fanged head carved from pinkish stone.

"That may be true." Bertrand allowed. "Still, it is not a good sign." He shook the box gently, and there was no movement. "Good," he mumbled. Turning to Jean-Pierre, he said "If you wish, I can ask the man who does the plates to send a copy of the picture to your family."

"The one by building C, you mean?" Jean-Pierre inquired, his lean, muscled arms moving like a tireless machine. He had gained much endurance in the jungle.

"Yes, the one with the natives. That is, of course, if you wish." Bertrand gazed at him expectantly.

"Only if it will cause you no trouble. But thank you for asking." Jean-Pierre flicked the last of the vines from the top of the stone head with his machete. They flew a few feet and crashed to the ground in a clump of weeds.

"Ugly, isn't he?" asked Bertrand, gazing at the face.

"To us maybe, but perhaps to these people he was handsome." Jean-Pierre sank to his haunches and stared at the impassive stone face, which gazed back beyond him, back into the jungle. "I wonder what he is looking for, or looking at."

"The past. The future," Bertrand countered. "Perhaps out to another city. Maybe at their enemies. But I think we ourselves will never know. That will fall to those who come after us. Maybe they will discover the truth."

Jean-Pierre ran his fingers over the roughly carved stone face once more before pulling away. "I can't stay here. I have to bare three more buildings by dark."

"General's orders?"

Jean-Pierre flashed a grin, his teeth blindingly bright in his tanned face. "What a novel way to put it. Yes, I feel like I am in the army. Every day he expects more of us." He scratched at his shoulder, absently fingering the frayed edges of his shirt where he'd cut the sleeves off to make himself more comfortable.

Bertrand followed the action with his eyes and laughed suddenly. "I wish I had your courage, my friend. My mother believed too much sun was bad for a man. She would never allow me to grow as dark as you. Why, soon you will look like one of the natives!"

Jean-Pierre shrugged. "It is more comfortable this way. You should try it."

"No, my friend, I'm not that brave."

A burly native walked up to the two men and indicated with gestures that the mail expedition was about to leave. Bertrand hurried away to secure his precious photographic plates, and the native stared at Jean-Pierre for a long time before he turned away.

Feeling disquieted, he walked to the next building on his list and spent his energies on the wall of vines. The work cleansed his body, giving him no time to think, no time to remember, and no time to brood on the strange happenings that hung over the expedition like a threatening cloud.

Later that night, Jean-Pierre kept watch on La Croix's tent. He must find out where the Professor kept disappearing to every night. It must have something to do with the mysteries they had run into. Jean-Pierre didn't like mysteries. He wanted answers.

Puffing on a pipe, La Croix strolled out of his tent. He glanced up at the moon and coughed. Wiping his mouth on his sleeve, he walked on. Jean-Pierre slipped quietly after him.

It started with a meandering walk through the city. Jean-Pierre was grateful for the dampness of the jungle. His tread was quiet here; the detrius on the ground wasn't dry enough to crack or snap beneath his feet. His dark clothes blended into the shadows and the quarter moon made those shadows very dark indeed.

Finally, just when Jean-Pierre was about to give up, to think that perhaps it *was* just a long walk through the city, La Croix took one of the avenues that led into the jungle. After perhaps five hundred feet, he left the road and entered the jungle, making his way to a vine-covered structure. The doorway was covered with a curtain of vines and the building was overgrown with a moss that made it blend into the fecund greenness of the plants around it. In short, it was almost totally camouflaged.

La Croix waited, and Jean-Pierre hid behind a rotting tree trunk. A low female laugh caught his attention. He saw La Croix smile as a woman in native dress brushed aside the curtain of vines. She went into his arms, kneading his shoulders and back. He embraced her, pulling the pipe from his mouth to give her a deep kiss.

Jean-Pierre's eyes had adjusted well enough to the darkness so that he was able to make out her face. A native, and of pure Quechua blood, no less. Such were few and far between in this part of the continent. Her large nose and dusky skin contrasted oddly with La Croix's light skin and aquiline features. She laughed again and worked at La Croix's belt, letting his pants drop free. She dropped to her knees and her hand slipped inside La Croix's drawers.

He couldn't watch. Jean-Pierre turned his back resolutely on the scene and made his way back to camp. "So," he thought to himself "that's where La Croix goes to." He was meeting his native mistress. Jean-Pierre marveled at his mentor's ability to find a loose woman even here, in the godforsaken jungle of

Central America. He truly did not know whether to be disgusted or amazed.

He was almost disappointed that it was nothing more than that. He had been so sure La Croix's disappearances had something to do with what had happened to Bertrand, and it was all for nothing. He shook his head. He'd been so *sure*.

The next morning dawned hot. Very hot. Jean-Pierre groaned and wiped the sweat running freely from his brow. Barely seven o'clock and it was already over a hundred degrees. He wasn't even sure he could make it to the cook tent. He had to pause every few steps to wipe his dripping face with his forearm or the back of his hand.

He made it to the cook tent and slumped into one of the camp chairs. He fanned himself briefly with the cloth napkin before giving up. It was just too much effort.

Bertrand came in next, fanning himself with his sketch pad. The look on his face was grim. "What is it?" Jean-Pierre asked, sensing more trouble ahead.

"The natives are deserting us like rats from a sinking ship," Bertrand said, in a near growl. "Six left last night, and the other natives are very frightened. They say we're working in an evil place, and that we are all cursed."

"Superstitious nonsense." Jean-Pierre managed to add as he slumped back against the chair once more. "Where is the cook?"

"He was going to leave, but I convinced him to stay. He is making breakfast now. It should be ready soon." Bertrand wiped his face with a crumpled handkerchief and fanned harder.

"What did La Croix say?" Jean-Pierre asked as he massaged the bridge of his nose, his eyes shut tightly.

"He was busy with that gold book of his." he shook his head. "I am... disappointed."

Ghislaine came in, her face heavily made up. The make-up was running in the heat, making her look as if she were melting. And it was not only on her face--her arms and breasts and throat were heavily made up as well. Jean-Pierre shook his head in disgust. Did she have to wear make-up now?

She looked directly at him, cool eyes unreadable. "The Professor will be in shortly." Her gaze shifted to Bertrand. "He hopes you have taken care of the native problem."

Bertrand snorted. "Six left during the night. I cannot stop them from running away. There are more of them than us and they know the jungle. I cannot control them."

Ghislaine appeared unimpressed. Jean-Pierre had never seen her so quiet, so controlled. Almost as if she were nervous, although he didn't know why he should think that.

"That is your problem then, isn't it?" she said, with a shrug.

"It may be all our problem soon enough," Bertrand said, his face flushing a dangerous shade of red.

She smiled a brittle smile and stiffened as La Croix came into the tent. La Croix smiled and pressed a kiss to Ghislaine's forehead and squeezed her arm familiarly. "Good morning, my love. Where is breakfast?"

"It should be coming soon, Professor. The cook wanted to leave but I persuaded him to stay." Bertrand wiped his forehead once more.

Ghislaine covered La Croix's fingers with her own as his hand traveled up and down her arm. He smiled at her again, briefly, and pulled his hand away abruptly. "Good. You must all work faster. We will never get this work done if we keep working at a sluggard's pace. Tell the natives they must work faster. Faster, or there will be no money."

"With all respect, professor, it is hot and the natives are working as hard as they can. If you refuse to pay them, they will leave." Bertrand's eyes were level as he stared at La Croix.

"They may say they are working hard," the Professor said with a negligent wave of his hand. "But they are lazy at heart. Shiftless. Slackers. Do not believe them. Work is all they are made for, after all. If they leave, we will simply hire more. The work must go on."

La Croix stared hard at Bertrand, and it was Bertrand who dropped his eyes first. "As you say, it shall be done," he mumbled, beginning to toy with his silverware.

A sudden triumphant smile blossomed on La Croix's face. "Yes."

Desperately, Jean-Pierre said "Professor, have you translated the book yet?"

"Yes, I have. I was right. Many years ago, this area was the center of a cult of blood-worshipers. The leaders drank only the blood of the captives from other tribes and the blood of the initiates. Perhaps it was symbolic. The book does not say. When one became a priest, he was given a special status, and set apart from the others. The priests lived apart, but once every fifty years, they would perform a special ceremony involving the two jade cups. All of them would become human again, except for one, and go out among the commoners to spread their seed. Then they would go through the initiation again and once again become the priests of their god."

"Human?" Jean-Pierre asked.

"Once they were initiated, they were no longer human in the eyes of the rest of the natives."

"You were able to decipher all that?" Bertrand asked.

"Yes." La Croix's voice caressed the word, his eyes half-lidded. "It was hard at first, but soon the run of the symbols became clear."

"What else did the book say?" Jean-Pierre asked.

La Croix drew himself up. "Merely elaborations on the rituals. They are described in exquisite detail. There are diagrams showing how to dissect the initiates, and where the major blood-carrying vessels lie. You see, they were very advanced in that respect. The pictures scribed into the metal show the blood system in great detail."

The smell of cooking food drifted in as the native cook appeared, a suspicious glare on his dark face. He slammed the plates of food down before Bertrand and Ghislaine, muttering something under his breath.

La Croix glared at him, staring the native straight in the eye. The man started visibly. His face went from contempt to fear before he turned quickly away. Jean-Pierre shot a look at La Croix, who was watching the native go, a smile of open contempt and hatred playing about his thin lips.

The professor's eyes flicked to Jean-Pierre and his smile grew wider. Then, his smile faltered, and he gasped as if in pain and closed his eyes. "Professor, are you all right?" Jean-Pierre asked.

La Croix opened his eyes and tried to smile. The cook placed plates of food in front of him and Jean-Pierre and then vanished without so much as a backwards glance.

La Croix waved a hand feebly in Jean-Pierre's direction. "A momentary weakness, no more," he said, pushing himself up from his chair with effort. He walked heavily over to the tent entrance. "But I expect more from you. Much more." He walked out.

Bertrand gazed at his half-empty plate with obvious distaste. "I am no longer hungry. I shall be at the ruins, sketching. Obviously, I will have to work longer to keep up with La Croix's demands." He paused briefly at the tent flap and was gone.

Jean-Pierre shot a glance at Ghislaine, who toyed with her food, pushing it into one pretty pattern after another, but never seeming to get around to actually eating.

"You do not eat?" he asked.

"I'm not very hungry," she replied, stopping to flex her fingers several times.

"What is the matter?" he asked.

"It is not your problem," she told him pointedly.

"Very well," he said, wiping his plate with his toast.

She sighed and began to rise as he did. He put his hand on her arm to move around her, and she flinched and cried out softly. He frowned and looked at her more closely, turning her arm over and wiping at her skin with a napkin. The make-up came off, and underneath...

She was badly bruised. Bitten as well. He'd seen the results of many a schoolboy fight, and even a barehanded boxing match he'd sneaked down to the docks to see with some friends, but this was as bad as he'd ever seen.

"La Croix did this to you?"

"What do you think?" Her defiant pose lasted only a minute before tears welled up from her eyes. "Yes, he did. I begged him to stop, but he wouldn't. He was never like this before."

"Why did you put on the make-up?" Jean-Pierre asked, caressing it off her cheek with the edge of the napkin. "Don't you know it will only make the bites worse?"

"I could not stand for anyone to see me like this. Please, I must go." She pulled out of his grip and hurried out of the tent.

He stood in the empty tent and watched the food congeal for some time before he, too, walked out of the tent, sweat streaming down his face.

Later that night, Ghislaine poked her face into Jean-Pierre's tent. "May I come in?" she asked, her demeanor subdued.

Jean-Pierre looked up from the letter he was writing. "Certainly." He got up from the cot and slid the letter under his pillow.

Ghislaine stepped in slowly, her face downcast and subdued. She wiped vainly at the sweat on her brow, and her voice was soft. "He is gone again, and this time I am glad."

Before Jean-Pierre could reply, she spoke again. "I wish he would never come back." Her voice was bitter and she hugged herself tightly, pulling the translucent material of her sweat-soaked white shirt tighter across her back.

"What makes a man do such things? He has never beaten me before, never! Even when I was bad, he was amused. But now there was nothing." She spread her arms wide, pushing her dark nipples tightly against the wet front of her blouse.

"I cannot answer for him," Jean-Pierre said quietly, moving his gaze straight to her face. "But I have noticed a change in him myself. Even Bertrand has said he acts differently now."

"I do not wish to think of him," she said softly. Her arms were at her sides now, the sweaty folds of her shirt lying limply against her lightly-tanned skin. She stepped up to Jean-Pierre, her head bent slightly down. "Please hold me. I want to forget him."

She embraced him, her head pillowed on his chest and shoulder. His arms went around her slowly, reluctantly. Her skin was hot on his, the thin sheen of sweat only making it seem softer.

He ran his fingers up her back to touch the silky softness of her hair. The scent of roses drifted up to him, and he ran his hand through the rich brownness of her hair. More scent, mingled with the deep muskiness of woman.

Her fingers touched his jaw, gentle and caressing. Her other hand slid down his chest, teasing and caressing all the way. He stiffened, but her lips were already on his, taunting him and drawing him deeper.

Her hip rubbed against his groin, and then, her hand. He could only draw away from her a moment, both of them gasping for breath, before seizing her in a fierce embrace, the sudden passion storming through him leaving no room for thought, and even less for regrets.

He awoke later to the feel of naked skin against his. Ghislaine stretched sleepily and opened her eyes. "Is it morning already?" she asked.

"No, it is still the night." He glanced at the flap of the tent before continuing. "What we did..."

"Was wonderful," she said, finishing the sentence for him. "You want to say it cannot go on, yes?" She shook her head. "Have no regrets, Jean-Pierre. You cannot live your life regretting whatever you do. I do not regret what I have done, and neither should you." She smiled. "If it makes you happy, I will go back to my tent."

She got off the cot and began dressing, pouting in distaste at the dampness of her garments.

"I have followed La Croix," he said suddenly.

"Ah?" she said, doing up the front lacings of her shirt. "And where is that? Where does he go?" The casualness of her tone was a lie when compared with the glint of steel that had suddenly appeared in her eyes.

"There is a woman living on the far side of the city, in one of the ruined buildings. A native woman. It is she La Croix visits at night."

Her voice was deceptively light. "They are lovers?" She waited, but Jean-Pierre could not answer and her smile was like the glint of a knife in the dim glow of the lantern. "I see. Well, I will go now."

"Don't do anything rash," he warned her.

"Rash? I?" She laughed harshly. "Never. But Charles has much to answer for." She straightened her skirt, her face momentarily ugly. "And answer he will." She opened the flap disappeared into the night.

The next day was cooler, and they cleared more areas of the city, although since more natives had disappeared, they were not able to accomplish as much as they'd hoped to.

La Croix had appeared at breakfast, a contemptuous smile playing about his lips. Ghislaine sat well apart from him, a cool, reserved expression on her face. She said nothing and went about her work silently, her expression boding ill for any who wished to engage her in conversation.

La Croix spent the entire day in his tent, transcribing notes, or so he said. None of them bothered to check, and he was not seen all day. He did not even appear for supper, a cold meal hastily prepared by Bertrand and one of the native workers, the chef having truly gone the night before.

Jean-Pierre retired to his tent to finish his letter, leaving the natives to clean the dishes. He wished to finish the letter to his *maman* and Tienette. He was detailing the problems with the natives as well as the other problems they were experiencing, when he heard Ghislaine say, "Leaving again?"

Casting aside the letter, he rushed out of the tent. Near the edge of camp, she confronted La Croix. Her hands on her hips, her body canted forwards, jaw set aggressively, eyes glinting like steel, she pinned La Croix against a tree.

He looked surprised, but then he grinned. "Yes, I am. To take a walk in the city, as I usually do."

"Pig's ear! I know about you and your new slut, your...mud woman."

La Croix was silent, his grin weak at the edges. Ghislaine ranted on, her arms waving in the frenzy of her emotions. "Is she good, Charles? Is she really good? Does she like you to hit her? Is she the one who has taught you your new tricks?"

La Croix's eyes flashed and he grabbed Ghislaine by the shoulders, shaking her violently. "You have gone too far, *doxy*. There is no one to see us, no one who will protect you. You wish to see what she has taught me?" His words were a fierce whisper, his eyes boring into hers. "Very well. I will teach you what she has taught me."

He caught her chin and closed his mouth over her throat. Ghislaine winced and gasped, her fingers clawing at the air before falling limp to the front of her thighs.

Then, she wilted, seeming to fold in upon herself, leaving her smaller and paler. Supported only by La Croix's mouth, she hung limply, her knees bent, until he opened his jaws and she sank to the ground in a crumpled heap.

Although he did not remember making a sound, Jean-Pierre watched as La Croix whirled towards him, mouth and lips stained with a dark liquid. Blood, Jean-Pierre realized, blood.

"Ah, Jean-Pierre." La Croix smiled. "You are worried for Ghislaine. Do not worry. She is merely sleeping."

"Sleeping?" Jean-Pierre risked a glance at Ghislaine's body, lying curled there on the ground, her hair in disarray, her body utterly still.

"Yes, and when she wakes, she will be immortal. Immortality, Jean-Pierre. I have found the secret of eternal life, and it is easy, so very easy."

"What do you mean?"

"Have you ever dreamed of immortality, Jean-Pierre? Have you ever wanted to live forever? Have the strength of ten men? Be able to hear a pin drop in another room? You can. You can have any woman you want. No woman will be able to resist you. You will be a god!"

"Impossible!" Jean-Pierre shook his head. "No man is a god."

"Old thinking, my young friend, spread by those who would limit us. Few are called to immortality, and to prevent the jealousy that would result, they say it is impossible and try to hold us back. They are wrong." He picked up a small rock and crushed it to powder in his fist. "You see? I speak the truth."

La Croix's eyes bored into Jean-Pierre's. The young man shook his head. He couldn't think. His thoughts were hazy, as if they only existed somewhere a very long way away.

"Well, what do you say, my boy? Will you join the ranks of the immortals, or will you bow to those who would hold our kind back?"

"Yes." The word hissed out. It was the only thing Jean-Pierre could say at the moment.

"Yes?"

"M-make m-me l-like you." The words seemed to be forced from an area deep inside him.

"Excellent choice. You will not regret this." The pressure of La Croix's burning eyes lessened slightly, but Jean-Pierre still felt hazy and confused.

"Give me your hand."

Jean-Pierre extended his hand. La Croix grasped it with his own pale one and jerked him suddenly. Off balance, Jean-Pierre felt La Croix seize him and something sharp and hot enter his throat. He stiffened against the sudden pain and exhaled as a warm surge of pleasure went through him. A dull roaring in his ears slowly died away as blackness overtook him and a peace descended on him. The blackness and peace were the last things he remembered.

He awoke to the dusk. A bluish glow in the west was the only sign of light. The night felt different to Jean-Pierre. There were no shadows, for one thing. He could see clearly. For another, he was completely awake, no sleepiness.

He climbed off the cot. He must have slept the whole day. He opened the flap, and a solid wave of scents hit him. The smell of exotic wildflowers, cooked food, human skin, blood, dust, and many others he couldn't identify overwhelmed him. Combined, they made a curious scent which threatened to overpower his senses. Soon though, he adjusted, and everything seemed normal again.

"Normal" of course, was relative. His perceptions were brighter, more acute. The world was moving in slow motion, or perhaps it was himself that was speeded up. He felt more alive than he had ever felt. He was in perfect control of his body. There was nothing he couldn't do.

His stomach rumbled, and he realized he was hungry. The hunger grew in waves, slowly at first, but increased with a quickness that surprised him. He walked to the cook tent, the air fresher and more bracing than any he'd experienced before. The tent was empty, which didn't surprise him, as meals were long over by the time the sun went down. However, there would be food left in the back, and the scent of cooked food tantalized him.

He picked up a tropical fruit from one of the baskets and looked at it for a few seconds, rubbing the green skin with his thumb. He'd never seen one that was so vibrantly green, the skin so smooth, that smelled so sweet. He'd often enjoyed the fruit's tart tropical taste, eating them for both breakfast and desert, but for some reason, something was different now. Though he could still taste the honeyed fruit on his tongue, the fruit before him...didn't interest him. Still, he bit into it, hoping his uneasiness would pass.

He chewed slowly, and then spat the fruit out. It was horrible, like chewing low-grade garbage. He spat again, trying to remove the vile taste from his mouth. He scrutinized the fruit. Perhaps he'd bitten into a rotten spot. He took another bite, but this time it was worse. He spat out the pulp and threw away what remained.

His stomach protested, and he swung out into the jungle to walk and think.

He followed no set path, wandering far and near, trying to think clearly. Time passed slowly, and then he caught the trail of a scent drifting on the air. It was like nothing he'd ever smelled before, he was sure, but it pulled at him, compelling him to follow. And it smelled...good. His stomach growled in hunger.

He walked slowly at first, but faster as the scent grew stronger, until he was running. He came to a clearing and stopped suddenly.

A native was tied to stakes in the middle of the clearing. The smell was so strong here that his stomach protested it's hunger even more loudly. The sound of drums filled his ears as he walked over to the man. What could smell so indescribably wonderful?

He bent over the man and noticed the cuts. Someone had slashed the native's arms, hands and chest. Blood oozed from the slashes, sliding slowly down the muscles and across the skin.

His legs refused to support him as the scent welled up around him. He slumped to his knees, eyes fixed on the blood. It was almost black in the darkness, and he could see pinpricks of light reflected in it from the stars above. He bent down, looking closer.

His lips touched wetness and he licked them. His stomach growled, and, mindlessly, he began to suck.

The liquid was like tasting Nirvana. It thrilled his senses, tingling on his tongue and burning a trail of pure fire from his mouth to his stomach. A comforting warmth filled his body, and a sense of tense anticipation filled him as the drums began to die away. Exultation filled him, his mouth filled with the wondrous fluid. He gulped it down and bursts of pleasure exploded inside him, each more tantalizingly intense than the last. The drums pounded faster, but with erratic notes, and then died away as one final wave of intense bliss poured through him.

He raised himself up from his prone position and, with a lick of his lips, looked down at the native. His skin had a grayish undertone and his breathing was still. Jean-Pierre touched the man's head, and it lolled limply to one side. He was dead. Jean-Pierre wondered how he could have died in so short a time. His wounds were not that severe.

And then the truth dawned on him. He scrubbed at his mouth with his hand and looked down. A trace of a dark liquid was smeared across his palm. Blood. He remembered the look of it on La Croix's face when he'd...killed...Ghislaine.

Vampire. The word struck at his stomach, making him feel hollow inside. He was empty. All he could think of was that word. Vampire. He remembered the tales of his youth, with his grandmother bent crone-like over the trestle bed he had slept in. The fire in the grate had turned the walls the color of blood, and he'd listened with the covers pulled up to his ears, just barely able to peer out. He felt the fear and terror once more as his grandmother had told him about the monsters with a thirst for human blood. He slipped his head into his hands, fighting back sobs of regret. He'd become one of them. The unliving.

"Jean-Pierre." His mentor's voice was silky and satisfied sounding. "How do you like being an immortal?"

Jean-Pierre felt a calm settle over him. His emotions were far, far away, where they couldn't touch him. He turned towards La Croix, whose eyes burned in his pale face. Two long, ivory fangs jutted from his mouth, making him look like a monster from *grandmere*'s stories. And yet, there was a touch of unreality that made him doubt his perceptions, a sense that time was creeping by like molasses and he was somehow caught here in it. "It is...different."

La Croix grinned, making him look even more obscene. "It will take time to get used to." He walked over and kicked the native's body, making it twist and wriggle in the ropes and giving it a hideous parody of life. "Did you enjoy your meal?"

Jean-Pierre looked away, and La Croix's laugh told him that the Professor knew exactly how good it had been. He was jerked about suddenly, and La Croix's dark eyes burned relentlessly into his. "Tell me how good it was, Jean-Pierre. Tell me." His foul breath smelled decayed, rotten, and although Jean-Pierre desperately wished to turn away, he could not.

"It was wonderful," he found himself saying without conscious volition. "It was better...better than a woman." He proceeded to go on in detail, describing every nuance, every sensation, every emotion. He tried to halt the flow of his words, but they continued to fall willy-nilly from his mouth in a never-ending flow. "Let it stop," he prayed. But it didn't.

At last La Croix released him and looked away. Jean-Pierre stumbled back, silent at last, feeling used and degraded. There was an emptiness deep inside him, and a sour taste in his mouth that wouldn't go away, no matter how hard he swallowed.

La Croix's eyes were back upon him. "Come with me. A friend of mine is giving a feast." A slow, cruel smile flowed over his face. "I think you will enjoy it."

"Friend?"

"Yes, a woman. I have found her to be most instructive. She taught me many things." La Croix's eyes rested contemplatively on Jean-Pierre. "I think you will like her. She is most...unusual."

"Very well, I will come." Jean-Pierre looked down and brushed dirt and leaf mold off the front of his shirt. There were bloodstains from where he had brushed against the native man's body. A thought flitted through his mind. He'd have to be more careful next time. And then he frowned. Next time? He didn't want there to be a next time.

"Come." La Croix stepped back, his eyes shadowed. "Ghislaine will be there."

"Ghislaine? She isn't..."

"Dead? Of course not. She has adapted well. She will make a magnificent immortal."

"I don't understand." What did he mean? Were there guidelines to becoming a vampire?

"She has the...personality to do well." La Croix grinned suddenly. "Come, my inquisitive student, my friend is waiting. I should hate to disappoint her."

He led a path through the jungle that was both twisting and confused, but Jean-Pierre could tell they were crossing their own path several times. La Croix was deliberately trying to confuse him, and he didn't know why. They passed through the city once and headed for the huts where the native workers were housed. A woman waited behind a tree, peering out occasionally to watch the huts. One of the workers sat on a fallen log, sharpening his machete with a whetstone. He looked nervous, pausing to peer into the jungle with every rasp of stone on metal. At last, he put the stone away and disappeared into a hut, hesitating long enough for one last look at the encroaching jungle.

The woman turned gracefully as La Croix and Jean-Pierre approached. Her forehead had a flattened look to it, and she wore a nose-plug of ivory inlaid with jade and turquoise to maintain the straight line from hair to the end of her nose. It gave her a disconcerting look, like that of a naked axe blade. Her thick, roman nose, combined with the flattened plane of her forehead, made her something alien. She grinned with no humor, a quick baring of the teeth, and muttered something to La Croix in a guttural voice.

"French," he told her.

She eyed him coldly before continuing. "Our...meal...awaits." her voice was hesitant, as if she were unsure of the words.

"Ghislaine?" Jean-Pierre asked, his eyes on this strange woman.

"Girl...there." She pointed across the camp. Jean-Pierre saw Ghislaine's face for a brief moment before it was swallowed up once again by the greenery.

"Shall we, my dear?" La Croix offered the woman his arm. She gave him another cold look and bounded into the clearing on all fours, like an animal. She dashed into the nearest hut, never coming out of her semi-crouch. La Croix followed her into the clearing and swept into another hut. There was a muffled crack, like that of breaking bone, and all was silent.

Ghislaine was next, and he followed her into yet a third hut. Two natives reclined on grass mats, starting up as he and Ghislaine entered. Ghislaine pounced on the first man, pinning his body to the ground with hers. She caressed

his throat lightly, lovingly, before seizing him by the throat and tearing his skin with her fangs.

A wild urgency filled Jean-Pierre as the second native ran towards him. The whole hut smelled of blood, and the essence of it filled his veins, making him hungry.

He caught the native's shoulder, and a strange feeling passed over him. He could feel the muscles in his face move in a way they never had before. The world became more intense, the smell of blood like the most beautiful of perfumes, and above it, he could smell fear. The fear of the man at his side. A brief burst of pain echoed through his gums as he lowered his head to the man's throat and bit into the coffee-colored skin. Blood welled into his mouth, and the sensations were ten, no, a hundred times fiercer. He swallowed and began to suck, aided by the spurts of the native's failing heart.

Ghislaine grinned at him from the floor. Blood dripped from her long fingers, and she sucked at them, like a child with sticky fingers, cleaning the blood off with efficient strokes of her long, pink tongue. She let the native's head drop, and it lolled to one side. "This was fun. Let us do it again."

"All right." He followed her from the hut.

The next few hours? minutes? were filled with hunger, and with blood. Lots and lots of blood. Nothing mattered except the blood, endless rivers of it flowing down his throat, sating his hunger, only to have it rise again with another victim. Ghislaine kissed him, her tongue wiping the blood from his mouth. He embraced her briefly, but there was always more blood. Much more.

Finally, their near silent progress was halted. One of the natives screamed, frightening the few that remained. Only eight men bolted out of the reed huts. Ghislaine darted forward, but La Croix's arm knocked her to the ground. "No, we need them. Call it...travel rations."

She laughed. An incessant pounding mixed with the crashing of underbrush reached Jean-Pierre's ears, and they all whirled. Bertrand ran into the clearing. His eyes widened in shock and alarm, and he turned to run. But La Croix was on him.

Bertrand spun around under his own momentum and La Croix's strength. La Croix's head darted forward and Bertrand grunted as white fangs sank into his pale throat. He exhaled, his eyes widening in mute protest as he looked into Jean-Pierre's face. His eyes pleaded, begged, until La Croix pulled his head away, ripping Bertrand's throat out with brutal efficiency. Blood sprayed in a fountain, and Bertrand crumpled like a marionette with its strings cut.

Shock replaced blankness inside Jean-Pierre. He stared at his friend and could feel no sadness, no...anything. La Croix embraced Ghislaine, who sucked the blood from his face, neck and shirt. Then, she dropped to her knees and sucked the blood from Bertrand's body. Jean-Pierre stood and watched her, not knowing what else to do.

They started out for the coast the next dusk. La Croix had staked out the natives so they could not escape. By the time they had awakened the next evening, the natives had soiled themselves in fear, but their blood was still warm and fresh and good.

Traveling had never been so easy before. The miles sped past as they loped through the forest, leaving behind the scent of crushed leaves and exotic flowers. They carried boxes of artifacts across their backs, and a few changes of clothes. It had been La Croix's idea to take the artifacts, and he'd been the one who had packed them. It didn't amount to much. Besides the gold book and the jade cup, there were only a few things. A gold trinket. Some broken carvings. Bertrand's pile of drawings, neatly stacked between two thin sheets of wood and tied with string. Only four boxes in total. It seemed like so little for all that had happened.

He ran on, tireless. He wasn't even breathing hard, and the trees seemed to part for him, making him run more silently than ever. There was no crunch of brush underfoot and it seemed as if he were flying.

But, deep inside he felt hollow, like there was a great hole where there once

had been something else. Any emotions were simply plastered on top, like someone trying to hide a crack in the wall rather than repair it. Instead of thinking about that, he concentrated on the wind rushing past. Then, he wouldn't have to remember.

They ran all night, stopping near a small native village before dawn broke. Creeping up on the huts, they swept quietly into the village, slaughtering the occupants in swift silence. The familiar joy in killing swept over him again as the scent of blood rose around him in a choking wave. Blood ran in rivers, filling him up with warmth.

Ghislaine concentrated on the babies and the children, cuddling them to her breasts, their eyes wide in mute terror, before sinking her crimson-stained fangs into their smooth, unblemished throats. She closed her eyes in ecstasy as red blood gushed down her throat.

She saw Jean-Pierre watching her and thrust a six year-old girl at him. "Would you like it?" she asked. "Young blood is sweet...and strong."

The girl's eyes were wide in soundless terror, too scared even to whimper. Her kinky hair was braided with bits of colored cotton string and her big brown eyes stared at him as she made a small noise deep in her throat. "No." The words seemed to come from very far away.

"As you wish." Her blood-stained mouth curved into a smile as she brought her fangs down on the child's neck, ripping her throat out. The girl died quietly, her eyes flickering shut to rest in peaceful repose.

With an oath, he charged out of the hut and into the forest. He stood with his fists clenched, chest heaving, before turning reluctantly back to the village. He had to get into total darkness before the sun rose. La Croix's instructions had been turned into a painful truth by the sight of Ghislaine's arm, with a bad burn caused by less than a second's exposure to sun. Even after her rampant feeding, it was red and tender. He plugged the holes with reeds and a layer of mud to keep out the sun, with blankets on the inside as a further protection.

There was a hint of light on the eastern horizon, and he could feel the heat spread through his body and across his face. He ducked back into the closeness of the hut, pulling the blankets closed behind him and lying on the packed-dirt floor. Then he closed his eyes and hoped sleep would come quickly. If only his conscience would be quiet. If only the emptiness inside him would fill. But neither thing happened, and it was a very long time before he got to sleep.

The trip back to the port took only three days. Three days of living like animals in the wilds, slaughtering helpless village folk and retreating to the darkness before the rising of the sun, emerging only at dusk to begin again.

Their eyes haunted Jean-Pierre. Bertrand's eyes, the little girl's eyes. They haunted him in the darkness before he slept, and, try as he would, he could not banish the images from his mind. Even while he fed, the images floated before his eyes. The taste of the blood soured in his mouth, and he ran into the darkness, chest heaving.

He would stand in the dark jungle, shaking with a weakness he could not identify. Once, the native woman came on him, and stared at him for many moments before spitting in disgust and walking away. And then the hunger to feed would come over him again. He tried to deny it as long as he could, and then it lessened and died away. But the eyes were still there.

La Croix told them much of their new condition while they ran, his words in disharmony with the beauty of the jungle about them. How they could never see the sun, how only blood could sustain them, how they were immortal forever. There could be no escape. Forever.

*

The port was a seething mass of humanity on the edge of the ocean. Boats left during the day for places far and near, but the docks were closed at night, silent and deserted. La Croix led them there quickly, registering the boxes on a ship for France leaving in two days. The sleepy guard had succumbed easily to La

Croix's teeth and mouth, which drained him dry in a matter of seconds.

The native woman left as soon as the guard died. With a flick of her raven hair, she was off, running into the city. The briny salt tang rose up in her wake, and restless waves boomed and thundered in the distance.

"Go," La Croix told Jean-Pierre. "Take all you want. The city is full and we will be gone soon."

The sudden hunger that washed over him was too strong to be ignored. He ran for the door and out into the street, bent over like an animal, keeping to the shadows. But the buildings were abandoned here, deserted except for a few sleepy night watchmen.

Disdaining such easy prey, he loped on into another section of the city. The houses here were prosperous, with carved wood moldings and lavish furniture seen through crystal windows. Most of the houses were two stories high, with plant boxes in every window and ornate grill-work on the fences. One or two had flowers in bloom, adding a ghostly scent to the already overpowering smell of humanity. Hundreds of heartbeats stabbed at the night, a chorus of drumbeats that were as distinct and separate as wildflowers in the field. Here he could hear the hiss of a heart defect, and there the too-rapid beat of the overweight. There, too, was the combined beat of a mother with child.

He could smell the dusky skin of children, bathed and powdered by their mothers before being sent to bed, the perfume a wife wore in the hopes of attracting her husband, the smell of ice cream and sugar candy and hair powder and violet oil.

He crept to the trellis of a house painted in cream and off-white. His ascent to the bedroom was silent and he'd slain both the plump husband and young wife before they could awaken, filling his stomach with the hot sweetness of their blood.

Then there was the nanny, grey-haired and wrinkled, who lived in the room next to the nursery. Her blood was old and thin, more like vinegar than sweet wine, but it did not matter, and soon she had breathed her last into the ruffled pillow.

The nursery was filled with toys that littered the floor. He sidestepped them with ease, killing the young boy in the cradle with not a sound to mark his passing. As Ghislaine had said, the blood of the young was rich and sweet, like candy syrup. But there was very little of it.

The last was a young girl, lying asleep in her trestle bed. Downy golden lashes fanned out on her plump cheeks, and her thick brown tresses lay about her on the pillow like a halo. In her white cotton nightgown, she was the very picture of an angel.

He picked her up gently. She moved slightly, resting her head on his shoulder. So trusting, so trusting. He brushed her hair back from her face, exposing her pale neck above the ruff of her nightdress. He lowered his head, but then raised it up again. Her scent was so familiar...

"Tienette?" His voice was hoarse, but the girl made no reply, simply pressing her body closer to his. Her lips moved softly, but no sound came out. Images of the little native girl danced before him, her brown eyes so very, very wide and frightened. And then Bertrand, his face a mask of silent appeal.

His shoulders shook as he tucked the girl back into her bed. He could not do this. He backed out of the nursery and then out of the house. Once out of the house, he broke and ran, back to the docks. Alone. He had to be alone.

He thought of what he'd done--what he'd been doing. It sickened him, the endless slaughter. He'd become no better than an animal, a beast of the jungle. No more. *NO MORE!!*

She'd started it, the native woman. She'd nearly killed Bertrand, and she'd infected La Croix with her insane blood lust. She was the problem. Whenever he was with her, he was an animal. No more. Tonight, he would reclaim his humanity.

It took him the better part of the night to find her. She'd found a bordello and was slaughtering her way through the patrons and employees like a dervish. Her skin had a deep flush to it, a sign of her wild rampage.

He beckoned to her from the window. Curious, she came closer, dropping the

young man's corpse she was holding like a straw-stuffed dummy before walking over to the window. *"Qui?"*

"Many people," he said, drawing the words out. "Much blood."

She licked her lips hungrily. "Where?"

"Follow me."

He led her to the docks. When he pointed at the end of one, she ran that way. Jean-Pierre uncovered the pole he'd sharpened to a point and hidden in a stack of crates. Grabbing his improvised spear, he ran towards her. She was looking out to sea, her back to him. He stopped running and threw with all his strength.

She turned, but the shaft flew straight and true, lodging in her stomach with an ominous thump and the crack of a broken spine. She fell backwards against the wooden pilings, managing to catch herself before she fell into the bay.

He came closer, and she pulled at the pole with little result. Blood trickled from the corner of her mouth as she grasped at the wooden piling with all her strength, splintering the log under her fingers. "Told him...not...to make you," she said, gasping. "You make...bad vampire."

Before she could say more, he twisted the spear free and brought it down again with lightning swiftness. She gasped as the wooden point passed through her and into the planks below.

Raising it up again, he wrenched the spear point free of the planks. She was impaled on the wood like an insect on a pin, and with a cry, he jabbed the pole into the water, pinning her to the bottom of the bay.

The water seethed and bubbled, like a witch's cauldron. The pole shuddered violently, once, twice, and then was still. Jean-Pierre let the pole go and laid there, shuddering, watching the moonlight on the water.

A slap on the back broke him out of his reverie. La Croix's voice boomed out. "I am proud of you, Jean-Pierre. Very proud."

Jean-Pierre got to his feet. "Yes?"

"I felt her die," La Croix told him, eyes sparkling. "I am proud of you."

He felt happy then. Everything would be all right now. Now they could start over again. Everything was all right. But why did he feel so uneasy?

"Now there is more left for *us*. Just think of it. We will rule France. We will live forever!"

He couldn't believe what he was hearing. "But the woman..."

"...Was nothing but an annoyance. She showed me the beginning, but *I* have found the end. She was beginning to grow tiresome. She was too arrogant by far. I am going to use my power in ways she never dreamed of. Stupid woman. She is better off dead."

He knew then it was hopeless. La Croix was just as bad as she was, perhaps even worse. He would live forever in a nightmare world of darkness, but Jean-Pierre would not be there with him. The jade cup. That would be his hope.

He pushed La Croix away in a sudden burst of blind strength. La Croix stumbled back, falling into the water. Without a second thought, Jean-Pierre ran, ran back to the warehouse as if the very hounds of hell were on his heels.

The warehouse was still quiet, although he could tell dawn wasn't too far away. He crept among the crates, looking for one big enough to hide in. At last, a pile of crates bound for America. There was nothing else large enough. Well then, America it would have to be.

He took the dig boxes and ripped the top of one crate away. A load of sawdust had settled almost a foot below the top of the crate. He put the boxes in, mounding the sawdust so the boxes wouldn't shift.

And then he slammed the nails back in with the palm of his hand. He plucked off the top of the next crate and climbed into a load of pinkish tropical fruit. The sweet, heavy scent closed about him and he pulled the top back on.

"I'm sure I saw him enter this building." La Croix's voice was soft, but Jean-Pierre heard it as clearly as if La Croix had been right next to him.

"If you say so, Charles." Ghislaine sounded bored and indifferent. He could hear the shuffle of her soles across the concrete floor. "Go and search somewhere else. If he is here, I will find him for you."

"Very well, *ma cherie*." There were some wet-sounding footfalls, and the door closed. Ghislaine walked among the boxes slowly, taking her time.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are," she said softly in a sing-song voice. Jean-Pierre stiffened as her footfalls came closer and closer. "Now, where would I hide if I were you?"

His body was like the string on a violin, humming with suppressed tension. She walked past, her heels click-clacking noisily. She stopped for a few seconds, and then passed on. He relaxed as her footfalls faded into the vastness of the warehouse. Still, he had to be quiet, because her hearing was just as acute as his, and if he could hear her, she could hear him.

He stiffened again as her footsteps grew louder. She was coming back! He willed his body silent as her footfalls grew closer and closer. "Sawdust," he heard her say. "He must be around here somewhere."

She was silent then, although he heard cloth rustle several times. What was she doing? He ached to see, and his fingers dug into the wood of the crate top with punishing force. The wood started to splinter and he reluctantly let up the pressure. "Don't notice me," he prayed silently.

Nothing. Just silence. The waiting was killing him. Although, he reflected with a wry smile, that was impossible since he was already dead. But wait, she was moving again. One step, just one.

The crate cover was suddenly jerked from his hands. Ghislaine looked down at him, her face a blank mask. "It seems I've found you."

"Yes."

"The question is, do I want to find you?" Her hazel eyes looked him over, and then past him. "Why are you leaving?"

"I killed the native woman."

"I suspected as much. La Croix wouldn't tell me where she'd gone." She brushed back an errant strand of hair. "Is that all?"

"I can't live like this. It isn't things we are killing, it's people. People like us."

"So?"

"Do you know what the woman said before I killed her? She said I was a bad vampire. She's right. I want to become human again."

"You're crazy." Her words were vaguely contemptuous.

"No. You remember La Croix's golden book? It said that vampires can become human again. I believe that, and though it may take a long time, I *will* be human again."

She was quiet for a long time. Abruptly, she slammed the cover of the crate back in place and hammered the nails through with her fists. After she had finished, he heard her voice. "I'm doing this because you were kind to me once. I consider my debt repaid. Go and chase your silly little dream of being human. The next time we meet, I won't help you."

She walked away. He heard her footsteps fade, and the door open. La Croix's voice filtered in. "I was worried, *cherie*. You were a very long time."

"I had to open a few crates, but there was nothing in them."

"So he isn't in there?"

"No, there's nothing in there we want." Their footsteps faded rapidly into the distance.

The immigration office was dingy and small, filled with the smell of dust and mold. The night outside was closing in, the gas lamps filling the street with the smell of kerosene.

The bell on the door jingled and Jean-Pierre walked in. It had been close, having to wait for the night. He was just glad the office was still open.

The clerk behind the desk was an Hispanic woman with long, black hair. She looked up with a twinge of annoyance coming over her features, but then she smiled.

"Can I help you sir?"

"*Oui*... I mean, yes. I want to become...a citizen." He smiled uncertainly, cursing his rusty English. She smiled back broadly, her dark brown eyes

sparkling.

"I'll just need your name."

"Excuse me?" He needed time to think. He couldn't use his own name, of course.

"Your name. What is your name?" she enunciated the words slowly.

"John." That was safe enough. He looked towards the window, and suddenly it came to him. "John...Night."

- The End -

[Lisa Savignano enjoys writing DR. WHO and BUCKAROO BANZAI fanzine stories. Her DR. WHO stories include "The Zombie Master," which appeared in Who Else? and "Passing the Reins," which appeared in First Facet. BUCKAROO BANZAI stories include "The Saga of Electric Blue," which appeared in The Naughty Bits, "Lessons," which appeared in More Naughty Bits, and "Cleaning Up After Gilbert," which appeared in Banzine #1. She has also written poetry for BLAKE'S 7, BUCKAROO BANZAI, BEAUTY AND THE BEAST, ROBOCOP, and ROBIN OF SHERWOOD. This is her first NICK KNIGHT tale. A modern day sequel is planned for GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS 2.]



SUBMISSION GUIDELINES FOR

THE TURN OF THE WHEEL, GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS, Z: THE ZORRO ZINE, and HEAVENLY CONNECTIONS

[Submission deadlines-- Z: THE ZORRO ZINE: Sept. 31, 1992
GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS 2: Jan. 31, 1993
THE TURN OF THE WHEEL 2: March 31, 1993
HEAVENLY CONNECTIONS: Sept. 31, 1993]

1. Please type and double space all manuscripts on one side of the page. Please be sure to include your telephone number, return address, and a SASE. Clear computer printouts are acceptable.

2. Be sure to number your pages. Put your name on each page.

3. Please include a diskette if at all possible. A 5 1/4 diskette compatible with IBM Wordstar or Word Perfect is preferable, but a wide variety of word processing programs for various computers on both 5 1/4 and 3 1/2 diskettes can be translated. If you have any questions in regard to this matter, please inquire.

4. We wish to work with our authors. If any editorial changes are made other than such small changes as the correction of grammatical errors or misspelled words, the author will have the opportunity to review the edited manuscript.

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11. Initial publication of each title will be in 1992, with annual or biennial publication thereafter, except that Initial publication of HEAVENLY CONNECTIONS will be in 1994.

12. For more detailed information regarding the requirements for a specific publication, please request the flyer for that publication.

13. All rights revert to the author or artist upon publication.

14. Please send all submissions to (NAME OF PUBLICATION) Mary Ann B. McKinnon, 254 Blunk Avenue, Plymouth, Mi. 48170.

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as of August 1993

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(Over)



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- Major DARK SHADOWS professional and quality fan publications and projects
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Our information is received directly from the DARK SHADOWS cast and crew so they can inform and update you, plus from Innovation Publishing, Abbelare Co., Action Kits International, MPI, Science Fiction Channel, and those responsible for the many exciting developments and projects for DARK SHADOWS today. We utilize entertainment industry contacts, TV stations, the professional media, and interested, enthusiastic fans from around the world.

Each issue is approximately 24 full-size pages, computerized, offset-print, with clear reproductions. We report in detail on current events, articles, interviews, photos, publicity, reports, and reviews of DARK SHADOWS-related information and activities.

PUBLISHED AS THE NEWS BREAKS!

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<u>9441 La Rosa Dr.</u>
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(Please include a large SASE - Self-Addressed, Stamped Envelope - with all correspondence)

A SHADOWGRAM subscription has been given as a DARK SHADOWS Pledge Premium for PBS TV stations airing DARK SHADOWS.

INSIDE THE OLD HOUSE

Established in 1978, each 60+ page issue of *INSIDE THE OLD HOUSE* contains original fan fiction, poetry, artwork, letters of comment, character biographies, news, classified ad section, and much more.

Here is a sampling of what can be found in each issue:

***THE FAN PAGE*:** This is a regular open column dealing with various aspects of DARK SHADOWS. Some of the more recent columns have dealt with "Who Was the Perfect Woman for Barnabas", and "Why the new NBC DARK SHADOWS Failed." Any subscriber may submit a column.

***FROM THE CELLAR*:** Letter of comments from the readers. This column often turns into an informal "rebuttal" page for the previous issue's *THE FAN PAGE*. Readers are encouraged to speak freely about whatever they wish to discuss regarding DARK SHADOWS, fandom in general, or whatever they feel like discussing.

***CHARACTER BIOGRAPHY*:** Starting with issue #40, there will be a detailed <u>character</u> biography of your favorite DARK SHADOWS characters. These biographies will delve into the character's history and personality as presented on the series. Suggestions for future biographies are welcome.

***THE COLLINS STORY*:** This popular serial by Kathleen Resch deals with the lives and struggles of the Collins family after the series ended. Currently the story is delving into the mystery of Caleb Collins during 1868.

***CLASSIFIED ADS*:** The perfect place to find that particular piece of DARK SHADOWS memorabilia that you've been looking for -- or trying to sell. Classified ads are free to subscribers

A subscription to *INSIDE THE OLD HOUSE* can be made at the following rate: two issues: $6.00; three issues: $9.00; four issues: $12.00; five issues: $15.00; six issues: $18.00. Please make all checks or money orders payable to: Dale Clark 11518 Desdemona Drive Dallas, Texas 75228.

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THE DARK SHADOWS STORYLINE

The DARK SHADOWS CONCORDANCEs are accurate, fully-detailed summaries of episodes of DARK SHADOWS. Each volume describes every episode within a particular time period. Additionally, each book contains many never-published photos, including ones provided by Kathryn Leigh Scott, Sy Tomashoff (DARK SHADOWS Set Designer), and candid costume pictures by Edith Tilles (DARK SHADOWS Hair Stylist). Also included are complete cast/technical crew lists, trivia, and special publicity materials. Each volume is fully illustrated by Arthur Warren Oddson.

THE DARK SHADOWS CONCORDANCE 1795 - $16.00. Full-color cover.
Episodes 365-461. Details how the witch Angelique, violently jealous over Barnabas' love for Josette DuPres, first tries to destroy that love by causing Josette and Jeremiah Collins to fall in love. When this fails to change Barnabas' feelings for Josette, Angelique places the vampire curse on him, leading to the tragedy of Josette's suicide. Victoria Winters, traveller from the future, is blamed for these events and charged with witchcraft by the zealous Rev. Trask.

THE DARK SHADOWS CONCORDANCE 1968 VOLUME I - $16.00. Full-color cover.
Episodes 461-571. Details the Dream Curse, the creation of the artificial man Adam, the arrival of warlock Nicholas Blair, the destruction of Cassandra, the resurrection of Angelique as a vampire, and Julia Hoffman's victimization by vampire Tom Jennings.

THE DARK SHADOWS CONCORDANCE 1968 VOLUME II - $16.00. Full-color cover.
Episodes 572-700. Details the creation and desctruction of Eve, Nicholas Blair's fate, the Chris Jennings' werewolf story, and the haunting of Collinwood by the ghosts of Quentin Collins and Beth Chavez.

THE DARK SHADOWS CONCORDANCE 1897 and THE DARK SHADOWS CONCORDANCE LEVIATHAN are planned for future publication. Please send a separate SASE (Self-Addressed Stamped Envelope) to the address below for information on each book. Each SASE will be returned when each volume is produced and priced, as they will be published at different times.

THE FINAL, UNSYNDICATED YEAR... DARK SHADOWS ran almost five years and 1,225 episodes. Of these, the final year - nearly 240 episodes - has not been seen since 1970-71. The following two volumes, available now, contain accurate summaries and photos from these "missing" episodes.

THE DARK SHADOWS CONCORDANCE PARALLEL TIME 1970 - $16.00
Episodes 981-1060. The plot: Barnabas enters the mysterious world of Parallel Time in hopes of ending his vampire curse. There he is trapped by alcoholic writer William H. Loomis. At Collinwood, Angelique returns from the grave to conspire against her husband, Quentin's, new wife Maggie. Quentin's friend, scientist Cyrus Longworth, conducts strange Jekyll-Hyde experiments. And the mysterious Roxanne Drew proves to be a key to Quentin's freedom, Angelique's existence - and Barnabas' very future.

THE DARK SHADOWS CONCORDANCE 1840 - $17.00. Full-color cover.
Episodes 1061-1245 (DARK SHADOWS' last episode). The plot: After the conclusion of Parallel Time, Barnabas and Julia find themselves 25 years in the future in a Collinwood abandoned, ruined, and haunted by ghosts. The only people who could explain the tragedy - Carolyn and Quentin - are hopelessly insane. Thus begins a chase through time to prevent the destruction of Collinwood and the Collins Family. Barnabas and Julia return to 1970 with the cryptic clues Carolyn gave them. They are powerless to change what has happened, and are forced to journey even further back - to the year 1840. There, the ultimate secret of the curse following the Collins Family - and Angelique's true identity - are revealed. This volume concludes with Parallel Time 1841, where the Collins Family is forced to undergo a hideous lottery every generation, a lottery which always leads to madness - or death.

Comments on the CONCORDANCEs: "The synopses are so detailed that seeing these fourth year episodes (if and when we do) will almost be an anticlimax." "Wow! Absolutely great! From the artwork to the synopses to the solution of the episode numbers' mystery, the book was a masterpiece. I especially enjoyed the photos that depicted these long-lost scenes." "You have done a truly marvelous job on what was obviously a labor of love." "Excellent research and attention to detail!"

Postage & Handling: Include $3.00 for the first book ordered, and $1.00 apiece for each additional book.

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ORIGINAL DARK SHADOWS NOVELS AND ANTHOLOGIES

SHADOWED BEGINNINGS - A Novel by Carol Maschke. Art by Anne-Marie Erental.
Julia Hoffman's disappearance from Collinwood greatly worried her friends. When Elliot Stokes found her, the secret she told him revealed more pain and personal tragedy than she'd ever known.
$8.00 including postage/handling.

FROM THE SHADOWS...VIRGINIA WALDRON
This collection of Virginia's stories is taken from many long out-of-print fanzines. Includes: "Merry Christmas, Willie Loomis", "The Scars of Betrayal", "The Outcasts" and four more. Art by Anne-Marie Erental.
$7.00 includes postage and handling.

FROM THE SHADOWS...MARCY ROBIN
This collection of Marcy's stories is taken from many long out-of-print fanzines. Includes: "Shadowed Soul", "Twilight Hour", "Lonely Spirit", 23 others. Art by Janet Meehan, Randall Beach and Sherlock.
$5.00 includes postage and handling.

The following publications are available in xerox form only, and will be copied "on demands". Please allow anywhere from two to eight weeks for delivery.

RESOLUTIONS IN TIME - a novel by Dale Clark. Collinwood, 1971: After Barnabas and Julia returned from 1840, all was calm. Then a mysterious stranger came to town, and their peace was shattered in a reign of terror such as Collinwood has never known. When they learned the stranger's identity, they realized his intent was not only to destroy the Collins family in the present, but in every generation that has ever existed. Thus begins a desperate race back through time to end the curse which has plagued the Collins family for centuries. Illustrated by Judi Boguslawski. Originally published 1980. Cost: $9.00

BEGINNINGS: THE ISLAND OF GHOSTS, a novel by Kathleen Resch and Marcy Robin. "Against a historical background of civil war and slave rebellion, of secrets, voodoo and sudden death. Josett DuPres and Angelique Bouchard grow to womanhood...eah seeking the love they know that someday they will find. Illustrated by Judi Boguslawski, Jo Ann Christy, Guy Haines, Cindy Jorgensen, and Janet Meehan. Originally published 1982. Cost: $18.00

DECADES: 1760 - 1800. This anthology focused on the lives, loves and tragedies of the Collins and DuPres families during the years 1760 to 1800. Events depicted on the series are explored and expanded upon; backgrounds given to familiar characters; 'what if' possibilities are explored. Contains stories by Virginia Waldron, Marcy Robin, Kathleen Resch, Jean Graham, Geoffrey Hamell, Dale Clark,. Art by Dave Billman, Shari Metcalf, Janet Meehan, Judi Boguslawski, Cindy Jorgensen, Jane Lach, Jo Ann Christy. Originally published 1982. Cost: $19.00

ECHOES - Stories by Lori Paige, Jean Graham, Carol Maschke, Meghan Powell-Nivling, Melody Clark and Virginia Waldron. Art by Jane Lach, Dave Billman and Anne Marie Erental, with color cover by Cindy Jorgensen. Originally published 1983. Cost: $12.00.

REBIRTH OF THE UNDEAD - a novel by Elwood Beaty and D. L. Crabtree. An ancient evil is brought upon the world, and Barnabas Collins finds a most unexpected ally - Count Dracula - in his fight to save Collinwood. Illustrated by Guy Haines. Originally published 1984. Cost: $12.00

DARK CHANGELING - a novel by Lori Paige, illustrated by Anne- Marie Erental. Lethe had finally found a family. But on her trip to Collinsport to meet her newfound relatives, her body is possessed by a jealous ravening power; one striking out blindly against the injustices in her own life, consumed with hate. And on her arrival, the thing inside her body set every inhabitant of the Collins estate against each other... Originally published 1984. Cost: $6.00

THE YEAR THE FIRE CAME, a novel by Lori Paige. Collinwood - late 1700's. Jeremiah and Barnabas were as close as brothers. Then the mysterious Laura came to town; an intense rivalry began. Then mysterious deaths began occuring... Illustrated by Cindy Jorgensen. Originally published 1985. Cost: $10.00.

Order from: Kathleen Resch, PO Box 1766, Temple City, CA 91780

AVON: ON-LINE

A BLAKES 7 GENZINE

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. . .shows Avon the calculator through his own eyes, dealing grimly with his situation... The subtle portrait built by (his) actions is as much an attraction of the story as the plotline, though the plot, as in all these three, is impeccably handled.
—Barbara Tennison, <u>Pressure Point</u>

...the exclusively first-person viewpoint very effectively establishes and maintains a high degree of tension. Elrod continues to exhibit a sure sense for the small details and mixture of the familiar and exotic...the characters and situations are frighteningly realistic. #2 surpasses its predecessor in quality, which was high...
—Eumenidis, <u>Tarriel Cell</u>

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Run with Suni and Rinn, away from the dangers of men in, "BECAUSE WE ARE DIFFERENT".

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And stay for "DRACULA'S REVENGE", on those who had killed his only son.

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HEAVENLY CONNECTIONS

Examples from the movies and television that demonstrate mood or atmosphere of the types of stories I'm looking for:

FROM THE MOVIES:
"Heaven Can Wait"
"Chances Are"
"Heavenly Kid"
"Made in Heaven"
"Here Comes Mr. Jordan"
"Portrait of Jenny"
"The Ghost and Mrs. Muir"
"Somewhere in Time"
"Always"
"It's a Wonderful Life"
"On a Clear Day You Can See Forever"
"Topper"
"Defending Your Life"
"High Plains Drifter"
"Somewhere Tomorrow"

FROM TELEVISION:
"Highway to Heaven"
"The Ghost and Mrs. Muir"
"MacGyver" episode in which Mac leaves his body in a near-death experience; episode in which he goes back in time to the Old West in a dream, is killed in that dream, and wakes up to find the lucky pocket knife from the dream in his pocket!
"Magnum PI next-to-last season finale in which Magnum has a near-death experience and really thinks he's dead; another episode shows the return of his friend Mac who had previously died; Magnum falls in love with a girl long dead.
Selected "Moonlighting" episodes
"The Two Worlds of Jenny Logan" (TV movie available on video)
"The Hanged Man" (TV movie)
"Paradise" episode in which The Grim Reaper comes to town seeking Ethan, but it seems that a higher power may have decided that it's not quite time for him to die.
"Beauty and the Beast": Catherine has a near-death experience when she almost drowns in the trunk of her car; Catherine is visited by her father after his death.
"Wiseguy" episode in which Vinnie makes the bells ring and McPike pulls out of his coma.

As the examples show, I'm looking for upbeat stories about near-death experiences, reincarnation, friends or loved-ones who come back as helpful ghosts, guardian angels who are trying to redeem a not-quite perfect life, small miracles that punctuate everyday life, ghostly or mystical displacement in time, or love stories with a beautiful but haunting quality. No horror, but harder-edged stories (particularly western) will be considered on an individual basis.

Apply these themes to your favorite fandom, or write an entirely original story. I would particularly like to see the hero of another fandom have a near-death experience similar to MacGyver's or Magnum's (Perhaps Vinnie, Hutch, McCall, Sonny, or Vincent?). Or perhaps one of our heroes could fall in love with someone who is really a ghost or somehow displaced in time. Here, too, is a perfect opportunity if there are any "Highway to Heaven" fans out there.

Use your imagination and let me hear from you!

Also seeking stories from the short-lived USA cable series MATRIX, starring Nick Mancuso.

Contact: Mary Ann B. McKinnon
254 Blunk Avenue
Plymouth, Mi. 48170

(All world views welcome, whether Christian, American Indian, Buddhist, Jewish, or something else entirely.

ALSO COMING OR AVAILABLE: GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS
THE GOOD GUY VAMPIRE LETTERZINE
Z: THE ZORRO ZINE
Z: THE ZORRO LETTERZINE
THE TURN OF THE WHEEL (based upon "Robin of Sherwood")

(submissions deadline November 1994)

Be sure to note that this one has two NICK KNIGHT stories, plus SON of DARKNESS and MIAMI VICE as well as ROBIN OF SHERWOOD!



THE SHERWOOD TUNNELS

#7 — Colour Cover by Arlene Cogan Olivier
(vampire theme: Max Schreck/Nick Knight)

Fiction: DECEPTIONS (ROS) Linda A. Furey
THE OTHER GIFT OF THE MAGI (DW/POTO)
Nancy Hutchins
HUNTER (The Darker) Denyse Bridger
KEEPING THE RHYTHM (ST-NG) Jackie Marshall
ONLY HUMAN (Nick Knight) F. Elizabeth Gregory
WINTER'S TALE (ROS) Julianne Toomey
THOUSANDS OF VOICES (Quantum Leap) Leslie Goldberg
ROGUE (Sapphire & Steel) David Tulley
ROBIN HOOD (ROS) Iva Stranglove
SKYFATHER (ROS) Janet P. Reedman
MOON IS MY MISTRESS (B&TB) Marcia Lefebvre
A CERTAIN TIME & PLACE (ROS/ST-NG) Jacquie Groom
CHILD'S PLACE (Miami Vice) S. Lee Story, MANY VOICES (ROS) Debra Batus
NIGHT OF RECKONING (Nick Knight & Max Schreck) Dianne m. Smith & Janet P. Reedman
ROBIN HOOD & THE HUNTER (ROS/Star Wars) Sue Burszynski
INTROSPECT/PARADOX (Wizards & Warriors) Denyse Bridger
L'IL EINHEIBURG (ROS) Iva Strangelove, WHOM THE GODS LOVE (ST-NG) Linda Knights
INTERLUDE (ROS) Lucy Doyle, DRY ICE (Nick Knight) Cheryl L. Conors
HEART UNMASKED (Zorro) Denyse Bridger, CLOSEST LEAP (QL/Alien Nation) Leslie Goldberg
SERPENT'S STING (Black Adder/ROS) Louise Bath, TASTE FOR ADVENTURE (Pulaski) Jackie Marshall
POINT OF NO RETURN (Nick Knight, Lost Boys, B&TB) Dianne m. Smith

Plus art by: Frances Quinn, Mary Prince, Kitty, Arlene Cogan Olivier, Mary Prince, Linda Knights, C.H. Burnett & Denyse Bridger

307 pages, spiral bound, $27.00 us

#8— upcoming late 1992 or early 93.
what I have so far: SPIRIT-WOLF (B&TB) Gianina D'Andrea, INFERNAL DEVICES (Space 1999) David Tulley
TOPLESS TOWERS OF CAMELOT (ROS/Star Trek) Sue Bursztynski, BENEATH THE HOOD (ROS) Kitty Camarra,
DANCES WITH WOLFHEADS (Robin Hood) A SOLDIER'S TALE (ROS) Louise Bath,
UTA MEANS SWORD (fantasy) Patience Sibeal, CLOSE TO THE EDGE (Pulaksi) Jackie Marshall
BLOOD RUNS DRY (original vampire) Dianne m. Smith — art by Frances Quinn & Todd Parish.

Need more to fill a zine. Send all enquires and material to the Editoral address.
Dianne m. Smith, 201 Sims Ave, Victoria, B.C. V8Z 1K4, Canada

All zine orders payable to: Bill Hupe, 916 Lamb Road, Mason, MI, 48854-9445, USA

Back orders of WHO'S BLAKE 1,2,3 & 4 and SHERWOOD TUNNELS ,5 & 6 are now available through Bill Hupe. Send SASE for prices. W/B 1 (DW & Blake 7 only) 2, 3 & 4 also includes ROS and B&TB
Sherwood Tunnels are multi media zines.

Sherwood Tunnels 8

SPIRIT-WOLF (B&TB- Catherine) Gianina D'Andrea
INFERNAL DEVICES (Space 1999) David Tulley
TOPLESS TOWERS OF CAMELOT (Classic Star Trek/ROS) Sue Bursztynski
DANCES WITH WOLFHEADS (ROBIN HOOD)
A SOLDIER'S TALE (ROS) Louise Bath
UTA MEANS SWORD (Fantasy) Patience Sibeal
CLOSE TO THE EDGE (Pulaski) Jackie Marshall
BLOOD RUNS DRY (orignal vampire) Dianne m. Smith
STRANGER THINGS HAVE HAPPENED (ROS) Jacquie Groom & Julie Phipps
THE DEN OF THE WEREFOX (ROS) Martin'o
RETURN OF THE FIREWITCH (Wizard & Warriors) Gail Molnar
KINGMAKER (Arthurian Legend) Tara O' Shea
AUGUST DIE SHE MUST (ROS) Nancy Louise Freeman
APRIL COME SHE WILL (ROS) Carrie O'Brien & Nancy L. Freeman
AT WHAT PRICE? (Kung Fu-Legend continues) Denyse Bridger
ROBIN HOOD'S PENNYSTONE (ROS) Janet P. Reedman
MY JOURNAL/TILL OUR PATHS CROSS AGAIN (Forever Knight)
Daisy & Lucy Leung
MYTH OF LIFE (Logan's Run) Denysé Bridger
LAST GOODBYE (Nick Knight) Dianne m. Smith

Art by: Todd Parish, Gail Molnar, Frances Quinn, Tara O'Shea, Paige Sullivan, Michelle West, Fiona M. Chaney, Jeannie McClure & Arlene G. Olivier
Colour cover by Frances Quinn

Send all enquires and Submissions to Editoral Address.
Dianne m. Smith, 201 Sims Ave, Victoria, B.C. V8Z 1K4, Canada

All zines orders :Bill Hupe, 916 Lamb Road, Mason, MI, 48854-9445, USA
Back Orders of all issues now available through Bill Hupe, send SASE for prices.

Z: THE ZORRO ZINE

Coming in 1993!



Fiction, poetry, art, and articles sought for all versions of the Zorro legend, including:

Duncan Regehr

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Alain Delon

George Hamilton

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SASE for notification of availability to:

Mary Ann McKinnon
254 Blunk Ave.
Plymouth, Mi. 48170

Z: The Zorro Letterzine/Newsletter

(Now sanctioned by Zorro Productions!)

Z: THE ZORRO LETTERZINE/NEWSLETTER is devoted to all versions of the Zorro legend. It is:

-A LETTERZINE through which all Zorro fans can have the opportunity to discuss any aspect of Zorro with others who are just as enthusiastic as they are! (Those who just like like to read letters are just as welcome as those who like to write them!)

-A NEWSLETTER to keep enthusiasts informed of any new developments in regard to media versions of Zorro or the careers of those who have played in Zorro TV shows or movies; and

-An OPPORTUNITY to share the history of the Zorro legend, and Zorro memorabilia and trivia with other interested parties.

Z: THE ZORRO LETTERZINE/NEWSLETTER #4 contains full size pages, with side staples and a regular zine cover with artwork. It has letters from John Gertz, head of Zorro Productions, Inc. and Philip John Taylor, the Family Channel ZORRO's story editor, plus a detailed episode guide to the fourth season of the Family Channel ZORRO, an article on Henry Darrow, want ads, and lots and lots of letters from Zorro fans.

SPECIAL DOUBLE ISSUE #2/#3 contains 52 full size pages with the same format as #4. It has letters, a complete episode guide with plot synopses and telecast dates for the Disney ZORRO episodes, an article on Johnston McCulley, short fiction, a retrospective of the film career of Duncan Regehr, and want ads.

Subscriptions are $12.00 for four issues. Issue #4 ordered alone is $3.50, or Special Double Issue #2/3 ordered alone is $6.00. (Please specify what issue you would like your subscription to begin with.)

I am greatly anticipating hearing from Zorro fans everywhere, and invite all correspondecne and inquiries.

Contact/Order From: Mary Ann B. McKinnon
254 Blunk Avenue
Plymouth, Mi. 48170

Also coming in 1993:

Z: THE ZORRO ZINE
Zorro fiction, poetry, and art
Approximately 150 pages
SASE for notification of availability

Introducing a new zine based upon HIGHLANDER

IMMORTAL TALES!

Seeking submissions of fiction, poetry, and art for a new zine based upon either the movie or the television series.

I am particularly seeking longer stories with good characterization and well-developed plots, but short pieces are welcome as well. Writers are also encouraged to build stories around flashbacks, or incidents in Duncan's past that he has mentioned in the show. Finally, crossovers are welcome if they are not contrived; perhaps Duncan wound up in Paradise after almost being hung during the Civil War — or he could meet a modern-day swordsman of a completely different ilk, such as Jonathan Raven. Use your imagination! The key is for the reader to pick up your story and not want to put it down.

I am always happy to discuss possible story lines, so write with your ideas. Submissions deadline January 31, 1994. Stories rated G to R are welcome.

Mary Ann B. McKinnon
254 Blunk Avenue
Plymouth, Mi. 48170

Coming or available from the same editor (SASE for more information):

GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS
THE GOOD GUY VAMPIRE LETTERZINE
TURN OF THE WHEEL (based upon "Robin of Sherwood")
HEAVENLY CONNECTIONS (media zine based upon upbeat encounters with the hereafter, such as friendly ghosts, near-death experiences, reincarnation, guardian angels, etc.)
Z: THE ZORRO ZINE
Z: THE ZORRO LETTERZINE/NEWSLETTER

Introducing a new "Robin of Sherwood" zine entitled

THE TURN OF THE WHEEL

FULL MOON, a novella by Janet P. Reedman. Sixteen years have passed since the death of Robin of Loxley upon the tor. But now Herne grows old, and a new Hunter is needed... Adventure and romance, loves lost and loves found for both Robin and Robert in the world of "Robin of Sherwood."

MIRROR OF FIRE, by Valerie Meachum. Liara the Irish witch has seen a vision of death upon the tor. Can she find the mysterious Hooded Man in time to prevent his fate?

GOOD FORTUNE, GOOD MEASURE, by Todd Parrish. The crumbling clay image of Robin Hood has left Guy of Gisburne in sad straits. What can he do but run away and hope he is not caught by the king's men? But then things get worse! A humorous tale of misadventure, mismatch, and woe, as a lumbering wagon leaves Guy prisoner of a broken leg in the home of a *very* reluctant Sarah de Talmont...

ON THE COLD HILL'S SIDE, a novella by Rebecca Brothers, Pat Dunn, and Diana Smith. The blood-drinking fugmwr gwaed has attacked Lady Marion. All seems lost until a mysterious stranger and his Lady show up to help, and Robin of Loxley listens carefully to Herne about how to use the silver arrow.

Plus stories by Gail Molnar, Agnes Vanderschoot, and Michelle Christian & B.N. Fish, and poetry by Janet P. Reedman, Gail Molnar, Linda Frankel, Denyse Bridger, Karen Campbell, and Lisa Savignano.

And there is also something completely different! WHAT IF Marguerite of Gisburne's husband had truly died in the Crusades, and Guy were the legitimate older son of Earl David and heir to Huntingdon? How would this affect the lives and personalities of Robert, Guy, Robin of Loxley, and all the other characters in "Robin of Sherwood"?

In a series of linked stories, Todd Parrish, Julie Phipps, Laura Chevening, Joette Rozanski, Anne Motley, and Jacquie Groom are the first to explore this possibility:

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Now accepting "Robin of Sherwood" stories, art and poetry for the second issue of:

THE TURN OF THE WHEEL

The following stories, poetry, and art are welcome as submissions for THE TURN OF THE WHEEL 2:

1. Any "Robin of Sherwood" theme

2. Any "Robin of Sherwood" WHAT IF theme

3. Material in the shared "Guy of Huntingdon" scenario, which looks at how the lives and personalities of all the characters in "Robin of Sherwood" would be different if Guy had been the legitimate older son and heir to Huntingdon.*

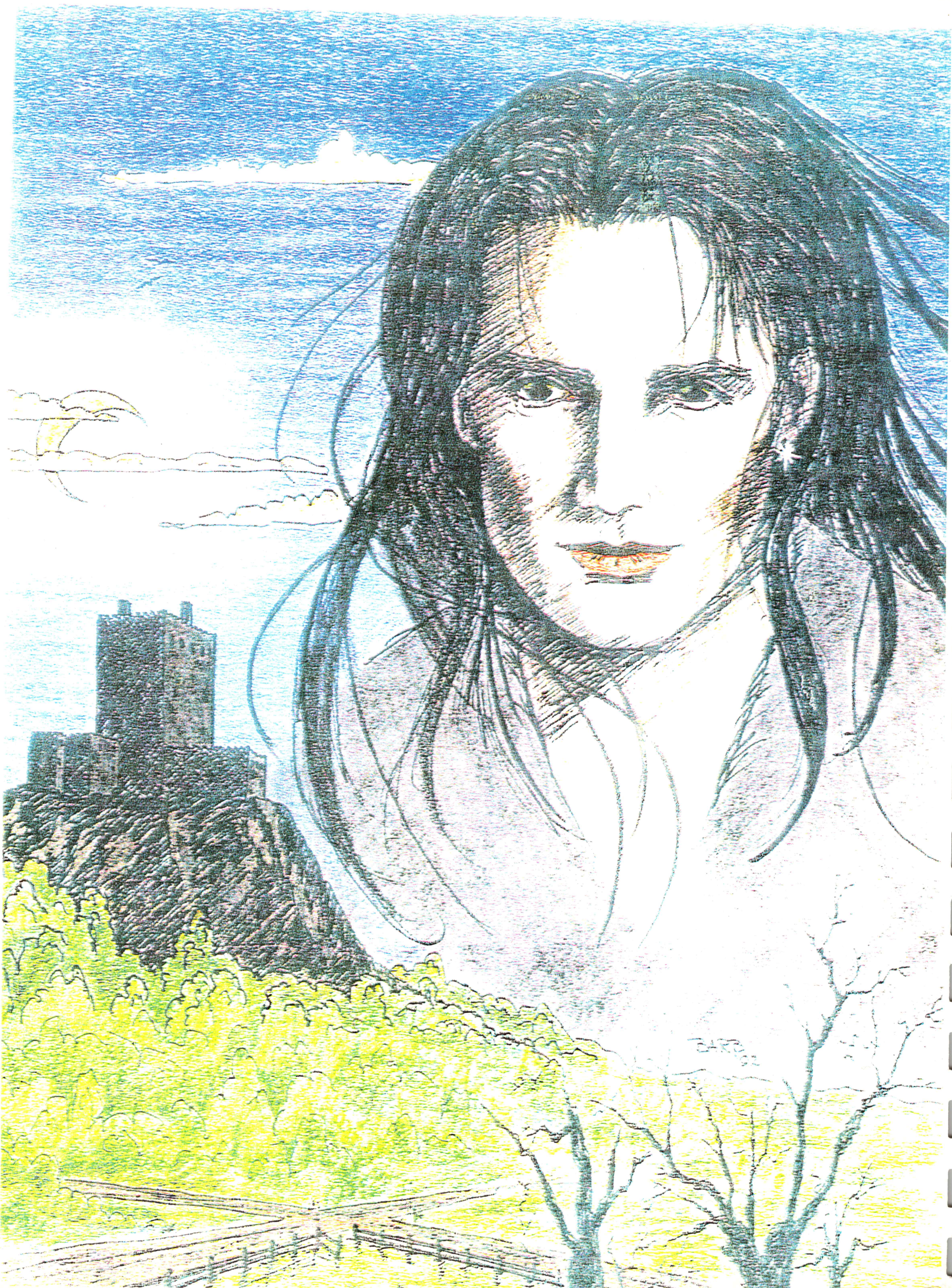
4. Independent "Guy of Huntingdon" material, not part of the shared scenario.

5. Stories based upon the OTHER roles of Michael Praed, Jason Connery, and the cast of "Robin of Sherwood": crossovers with the series are particularly welcome. DO please make sure that the reader would not need ANY familiarity with the other role in order to enjoy the story.

6. Articles exploring the historical background of the series.

*If you would like to write in the shared "Guy of Huntingdon" scenario, please contact me and let me know what story idea you have in mind: this way I can send you notes as to where the shared scenario currently stands, and make sure that two people don't write the same story or contradict one another in a major way!

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